

THE IDEA OF COMMUNISM

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'Do not be afraid, join us, come back! You've had your anti-communist fun, and you are pardoned for it – time to get serious once again!'

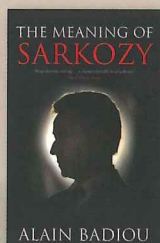
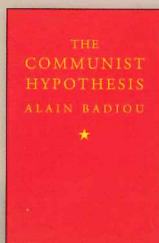
Slavoj Žižek

Responding to Alain Badiou's 'communist hypothesis', the leading political philosophers of the Left convened in London in 2009 to take part in a landmark conference to discuss the perpetual, persistent notion that, in a truly emancipated society, all things should be owned in common. This volume brings together their discussions on the philosophical and political import of the communist idea, highlighting both its continuing significance and the need to reconfigure the concept within a world marked by havoc and crisis.

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15 How to Begin From the Beginning

Slavoj Žižek

When, in 1922, after winning the Civil War against all odds, the Bolsheviks had to retreat into the 'New Economic Policy' (NEP), which allowed a much wider scope for the market economy and private property, Lenin wrote a wonderful short text entitled 'On Ascending a High Mountain'. He uses the simile of a climber who has to return to the valley, after a first failed attempt to reach a new mountain peak, as a way of describing what it means to make a retreat in the revolutionary process. When we are retreating,

the voices from below ring with malicious joy. They do not conceal it; they chuckle gleefully and shout: 'He'll fall in a minute! Serve him right, the lunatic!' Others try to conceal their malicious glee. They moan and raise their eyes to heaven in sorrow, as if to say: 'It grieves us sorely to see our fears justified! But did not we, who have spent all our lives working out a judicious plan for scaling this mountain, demand that the ascent be postponed until our plan was complete? And if we so vehemently protested against taking this path, which this lunatic is now abandoning (look, look, he has turned back! He is descending! A single step is taking him hours of preparation! And yet we were roundly abused when time and again we demanded moderation and caution!), if we so fervently censured this lunatic and warned everybody against imitating and helping him, we did so entirely because of our devotion to the great plan to scale this mountain, and in order to prevent this great plan from being generally discredited!'

After enumerating the achievements and the failures of the Soviet state, Lenin then goes on to emphasize the necessity of fully admitting to mistakes:

Those Communists are doomed who imagine that it is possible to finish such an epoch-making undertaking as completing the foundations of

socialist economy (particularly in a small-peasant country) without making mistakes, without retreats, without numerous alterations to what is unfinished or wrongly done. Communists who have no illusions, who do not give way to despondency, and who preserve their strength and flexibility 'to begin from the beginning' over and over again in approaching an extremely difficult task, are not doomed (and in all probability will not perish).¹

This is Lenin at his Beckettian best, echoing the line from *Worstward Ho*: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' Lenin's climbing simile deserves a close reading. His conclusion – 'to begin from the beginning over and over again' – makes it clear that he is not talking merely of slowing down progress in order to fortify what has already been achieved, but precisely of *descending back to the starting point*: one should 'begin from the beginning', not from the peak one may have successfully reached in the previous effort. In Kierkegaard's terms, a revolutionary process is not a gradual progress, but a repetitive movement, a movement of *repeating the beginning* again and again. And this, exactly, is where we find ourselves today, after the 'obscure disaster' of 1989. As in 1922, the voices from below ring with malicious joy all around us: 'Serves you right, you lunatics who wanted to force your totalitarian vision on society!' Others try to conceal their glee, moaning and raising their eyes to heaven in sorrow, as if to say: 'It grieves us sorely to see our fears justified! How noble your vision of creating a just society was! Our hearts beat with you, but our reason told us that your noble plans would finish only in misery and new unfreedoms!' While rejecting any compromise with these seductive voices, we definitely have to 'begin from the beginning', that is, not to 'build further upon the foundations' of the revolutionary epoch of the twentieth century (which lasted from 1917 to 1989), but to 'descend' to the starting point and follow a *different* path. It is against this background that one should read Badiou's re-affirmation of the communist idea:

The communist hypothesis remains the right hypothesis, as I have said, and I do not see any other. If this hypothesis should have to be abandoned, then it is not worth doing anything in the order of collective action. Without the perspective of communism, without this Idea, nothing in the historical and political future is of such a kind as to

1 V. I. Lenin, 'Notes of a Publicist: On Ascending a High Mountain . . .', in *Collected Works*, vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), pp. 204–11.

interest the philosopher. Each individual can pursue their private business, and we won't mention it again . . . But holding on to the Idea, the existence of the hypothesis, does not mean that its first form of presentation, focused on property and the state, must be maintained just as it is. In fact, what we are ascribed as a philosophical task, we could say even a duty, is to help a new modality of existence of the hypothesis to come into being. New in terms of the type of political experimentation to which this hypothesis could give rise.²

One should be careful not to read these lines in a Kantian way, conceiving communism as a 'regulative Idea', thereby resuscitating the spectre of an 'ethical socialism' with equality as its a priori norm-axiom. One should rather maintain the precise reference to a set of social antagonisms which generate the need for communism – Marx's good old notion of communism not as an ideal, but as a movement which reacts to actual social antagonisms, is still fully relevant. If we conceive communism as an 'eternal Idea', this implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal, that the antagonism to which communism reacts will always exist – and from here, it is only one small step to a 'deconstructive' reading of communism as a dream of presence, of abolishing all alienating re-presentation, a dream which thrives on its own impossibility. How, then, are we to break out of this formalism in order to formulate antagonisms which will continue to generate the communist Idea? Where are we to look for this Idea's new mode?

It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama's notion of the End of History, but most people today *are* Fukuyamaean: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is try to make it more just, tolerant, etc. Consider what happened recently to Marco Cicala, an Italian journalist: when, in an article, he used the word 'capitalism', the editor asked him if this was really necessary – could he not replace the word with a synonym, such as 'economy'? What better proof of the total triumph of capitalism than the virtual disappearance of the very term in the last two or three decades?

A simple but pertinent question arises here: if liberal-democratic capitalism obviously works better than all known alternatives, if liberal-democratic capitalism is, if not the best, then at least the least bad form of society, then why do we not simply resign ourselves to it in a mature

2 Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (London and New York: Verso, 2008), p. 115.

way, even accept it wholeheartedly? Why insist, against all hope, on the communist Idea? Is not such an insistence an exemplary case of the narcissism of the lost Cause?

This deadlock is hardly new – the great defining problem of Western Marxism was the lack of a revolutionary subject: why is it that the working class does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent? This problem provided the main *raison d'être* for its reference to psychoanalysis, evoked precisely to explain the unconscious libidinal mechanisms which prevent the rise of class consciousness, mechanisms inscribed into the very being (social situation) of the working class. In this way, the truth of the Marxist socio-economic analysis could be saved, and there was no reason to give ground to the 'revisionist' theories about the rise of the middle classes, etc. For this same reason, Western Marxism was also engaged in a constant search for other social agents who could play the role of the revolutionary agent, as understudies to replace the indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students, intellectuals, the excluded . . .

Again, then, it is not enough to remain faithful to the communist Idea – one has to locate it in real historical antagonisms which give this Idea a practical urgency. The only *true* question today is: do we endorse the predominant naturalization of capitalism, or does today's global capitalism contain antagonisms powerful enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction? There are four such antagonisms: the looming threat of *ecological* catastrophe, the inappropriateness of the notion of *private property* for so-called 'intellectual property', the socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (especially in biogenetics), and, last but not least, *new forms of apartheid*, new Walls and slums. There is a qualitative difference between the last feature – the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included – and the other three, which designate the domains of what Hardt and Negri call the 'commons', the shared substance of our social being, the privatization of which involves violent acts which should also, where necessary, be resisted with violent means:

– *the commons of culture*, the immediately socialized forms of 'cognitive' capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post, etc. (if Bill Gates were to be allowed a monopoly, we would have reached the absurd situation in which a private individual would literally own the software texture of our basic network of communication);

– *the commons of external nature*, threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to rain forests and the natural habitat itself);
 – *the commons of internal nature* (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity); with new biogenetic technology, the creation of a New Man in the literal sense of changing human nature becomes a realistic prospect.

What the struggles in all these domains share is an awareness of the potential for destruction, up to and including the self-annihilation of humanity itself, if the capitalist logic of enclosing the commons is allowed a free run. Nicholas Stern was right to characterize the climate crisis as 'the greatest market failure in human history'.³ So when Kishan Khoday, a UN team leader, recently wrote, 'There is an increasing spirit of global environmental citizenship, a desire to address climate change as a matter of common concern to all humanity',⁴ one should give all weight to the terms 'global citizenship' and 'common concern' – the need to establish a global political organization and engagement which, neutralizing and channelling market mechanisms, expresses a properly communist perspective.

It is this reference to the 'commons' which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of communism: it enables us to see the progressing 'enclosure' of the commons as a process of proletarianization of those who are thereby excluded from their own substance. Today's historical situation not only does not compel us to drop the notion of proletariat, of the proletarian position – on the contrary, it compels us to radicalize it to an existential level well beyond Marx's imagination. We need a more radical notion of the proletarian subject, a subject reduced to the evanescent point of the Cartesian *cogito*, deprived of its substantial content.

For this reason, the new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians having 'nothing to lose but their chains', we are in danger of losing *everything*: the threat is that we will be reduced to an abstract empty Cartesian subject deprived of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being makes us all in a way proletarians, reduced to 'substanceless subjectivity', as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*. The figure of the 'part of no-part' confronts us with the truth of our own position, and the ethico-political challenge is

³ Quoted in *Time* magazine, 24 December 2007, p. 2.

⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

to recognize ourselves in this figure – in a way, we are all excluded, from nature as well as from our symbolic substance. Today, we are all potentially a *homo sacer*, and the only way to defend against actually becoming so is to act preventively.

This proletarianization alone, however, is not sufficient if we want to be counted as communists. The ongoing enclosure of the commons concerns the relations of people to the objective conditions of their life-process, as well as relations between people: the commons are privatized at the expense of the proletarianized majority. There is nevertheless a gap between these two aspects – the commons can also be restored to collective humanity without communism, in an authoritarian-communitarian regime; the de-substantialized, 'rootless' subject, deprived of its substantial content, can also be counteracted in the direction of communitarianism, by finding its proper place in a new substantial community. In this precise sense, Negri was on the mark with his anti-socialist title *Goodbye Mr Socialism*: communism is to be opposed to socialism, which, in place of the egalitarian collective, offers a solidary organic community – Nazism was national socialism, not national communism. There can be a socialist anti-Semitism, there cannot be a communist one. (If it appears otherwise, as in Stalin's last years, it is only as an indicator of a lack of fidelity to the revolutionary event.) Eric Hobsbawm recently published a column with the title: 'Socialism failed, capitalism is bankrupt. What comes next?' The answer is: communism. Socialism wants to solve the first three antagonisms without the fourth one, without the singular universality of the proletariat. The only way for the global capitalist system to survive its long-term antagonism and simultaneously to avoid the communist solution, will be to reinvent some kind of socialism – in the guise of communitarianism, populism, capitalism with Asian values, or whatever. The future will be communist . . . or socialist.

This is why we should insist on the qualitative difference between the last antagonism, the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included, and the other three: it is only the reference to the Excluded that justifies the term communism. There is nothing more 'private' than a State community which perceives the Excluded as a threat and worries how to keep them at a proper distance. In other words, in the series of the four antagonisms, that between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one: without it, all others lose their subversive edge. Ecology turns into a problem of sustainable development, intellectual property into a complex legal challenge, biogenetics into an ethical issue. One can

sincerely fight to preserve the environment, defend a broader notion of intellectual property, oppose the copyrighting of genes, without confronting the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded. What's more, one can even formulate some of these struggles in terms of the Included being threatened by the polluting Excluded. In this way, we get no true universality, only 'private' concerns in the Kantian sense of the term. Corporations like Whole Foods and Starbucks continue to enjoy favour among liberals even though they both engage in anti-union activities; the trick is that they sell products with a progressive spin: one buys coffee made with beans bought at above fair market value, one drives a hybrid vehicle, one buys from companies that provide good benefits for their staff and customers (according to the corporation's own standards), etc. In short, without the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, we may well find ourselves in a world in which Bill Gates is the greatest humanitarian fighting poverty and diseases and Rupert Murdoch the greatest environmentalist, mobilizing hundreds of millions through his media empire.

It is thus crucial to insist on the communist-egalitarian emancipatory Idea, and insist in a very precise Marxian sense: there are social groups which, on account of their lacking a determinate place in the 'private' order of social hierarchy, stand directly for universality; they are what Rancière calls the 'part of no-part' of the social body. All truly emancipatory politics is generated by the short circuit between the universality of the 'public use of reason' and the universality of the 'part of no-part' – this was already the communist dream of the young Marx: to bring together the universality of philosophy with the universality of the proletariat. From Ancient Greece, we have a name for the intrusion of the Excluded into the socio-political space: democracy. Our question today is: is democracy still an appropriate name for this egalitarian explosion? The two extremes here are, on the one hand, the cursory dismissal of democracy as the mere illusory form of appearance of its opposite (class domination), and, on the other, the claim that the democracy we have, the really-existing democracy, is a distortion of true democracy – along the lines of Gandhi's famous reply to a British journalist who asked him what he thought about Western civilization: 'I think it would be a good idea.' Obviously, the debate which moves between these two extremes is too abstract: what we need to introduce as the criterion is the question of how democracy relates to the dimension of universality embodied in the Excluded.

There is, however, a recurrent problem we encounter here: the passage from the Jacobins to Napoleon, from the October Revolution to Stalin, from Mao's Cultural Revolution to Deng Xiaoping's capitalism. How are we to read this passage? Is the second phase (Thermidor) the 'truth' of the first revolutionary phase (as Marx sometimes seems to claim), or is it just that the revolutionary evental series has exhausted itself? Let us focus briefly on the Cultural Revolution, which we can read at two different levels. If read as a part of historical reality (being), it can easily be submitted to a 'dialectical' analysis which perceives the final outcome of a historical process as its 'truth': the ultimate failure of the Cultural Revolution bears witness to the inherent inconsistency of the very project ('notion') of Cultural Revolution. It is the explication-deployment-actualization of these inconsistencies (in the same way that, for Marx, the vulgar, non-heroic, capitalist daily life of profit-seeking is the 'truth' of Jacobin revolutionary heroism).

If, however, we analyse it as an Event, as an enactment of the eternal Idea of egalitarian Justice, then the ultimate factual result of the Cultural Revolution, its catastrophic failure and reversal into the recent capitalist explosion, does not exhaust the real of the Cultural Revolution: the eternal Idea of the Cultural Revolution survives its defeat in socio-historical reality; it continues to lead the underground spectral life of the ghosts of failed utopias which haunt future generations, patiently awaiting its next resurrection. This brings us back to Robespierre, who expressed in a touching way the simple faith in the eternal Idea of freedom which persists through all defeats, without which, as was clear to him, a revolution 'is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime', the faith most poignantly expressed in his very last speech on 8 Thermidor 1794, the day before his arrest and execution:

But there do exist, I can assure you, souls that are feeling and pure; it exists, that tender, imperious and irresistible passion, the torment and delight of magnanimous hearts; that deep horror of tyranny, that compassionate zeal for the oppressed, that sacred love for the homeland, that even more sublime and holy love for humanity, without which a great revolution is just a noisy crime that destroys another crime; it does exist, that generous ambition to establish here on earth the world's first Republic.⁵

Does the same not hold even more for the last big instalment in the life of this Idea, the Maoist Cultural Revolution? Without this Idea which

5 Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 129.

sustained the revolutionary enthusiasm, the Cultural Revolution was to an even greater degree 'just a noisy crime that destroys another crime'. One should recall here Hegel's sublime words on the French Revolution, from his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* – which, of course, did not prevent him from coldly analysing the inner necessity of this explosion of abstract freedom turning into its opposite, the self-destructive revolutionary terror; however, one should never forget that Hegel's critique is immanent, accepting the basic principle of the French Revolution (and of its key supplement, the Haitian Revolution). And one should do exactly the same apropos the October Revolution (and, later, the Chinese Revolution): it was the first case in the entire history of humanity of a successful revolt on the part of the exploited poor – they were the zero-level members of the new society, they set the standards. The revolution stabilized itself into a new social order, a new world was created and miraculously survived for decades, amid unthinkable economic and military pressure and isolation. This was effectively 'a glorious mental dawn. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch.' Against all hierarchic orders, egalitarian universality directly came to power. This is what the Hegelian approach clearly sees: far from reducing the revolutionary explosion to its final outcome, it fully acknowledges its universal 'eternal' moment.

The communist Idea thus persists: it survives the failures of its realization as a spectre which returns again and again, in an endless persistence best recapitulated by Beckett's already-quoted words: 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better.' This brings us to the crux of the matter. One of the mantras of the postmodern left is that one should finally leave behind the 'Jacobin–Leninist' paradigm of centralized dictatorial power. Perhaps, the time has come to turn this mantra around and admit that a dose of this 'Jacobin–Leninist' paradigm is precisely what the left needs today: today, more than ever, one should insist on what Badiou calls the 'eternal' Idea of communism or the communist 'invariants' – its other 'four fundamental concepts' at work from Plato through the medieval millenarian revolts to Jacobinism, Leninism and Maoism: strict *egalitarian justice*, disciplinary *terror*, political *voluntarism*, and *trust in the people*. This matrix is not 'superseded' by any new postmodern or postindustrial or post-whatever-you-want dynamics. However, till now, till the present historical moment, this eternal Idea functioned as, precisely, a Platonic Idea which persisted, returning again and again after every defeat. What is missing here – to put it in philosophico-theological terms – is the privileged link of the Idea

to a singular historical moment (in the same way that, in Christianity, the whole eternal divine edifice stands and falls with the contingent event of the birth and death of Christ). There is something unique in today's constellation: many perspicuous analysts have noted that contemporary capitalism poses a problem for this logic of a resistance which persists – let me quote Brian Massumi's clear formulation of how contemporary capitalism has already overcome the logic of totalizing normality and adopted the logic of the erratic excess:

the more varied, and even erratic, the better. Normalcy starts to lose its hold. The regularities start to loosen. This loosening of normalcy is part of capitalism's dynamic. It's not a simple liberation. It's capitalism's own form of power. It's no longer disciplinary institutional power that defines everything, it's capitalism's power to produce variety – because markets get saturated. Produce variety and you produce a niche market. The oddest of affective tendencies are okay – as long as they pay. Capitalism starts intensifying or diversifying affect, but only in order to extract surplus-value. It hijacks affect in order to intensify profit potential. It literally valorizes affect. The capitalist logic of surplus-value production starts to take over the relational field that is also the domain of political ecology, the ethical field of resistance to identity and predictable paths. It's very troubling and confusing, because it seems to me that there's been a certain kind of convergence between the dynamic of capitalist power and the dynamic of resistance.⁶

Throughout the age of Really Existing Socialism, the secret hope of 'democratic socialists' was placed in the direct democracy of the 'soviets', workers' councils as the form of self-organization of the people; and it is deeply symptomatic how, with the decline of Really Existing Socialism, this emancipatory shadow which haunted it all the time has also disappeared. Is this not the ultimate confirmation of the fact that the council-version of 'democratic socialism' was just a spectral double of the 'bureaucratic' Really Existing Socialism, its inherent transgression with no substantial positive content of its own, i.e., unable to serve as the permanent basic organizing principle of a society? This is a profoundly Hegelian lesson of 'abstract negation': the end of a constellation is not the

⁶ Brian Massumi, 'Navigating Movements', in Mary Zournazi (ed.), *Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 224.

victory of its counter-force, but also the defeat of that counter-force.

Of course, egalitarian-emancipatory 'de-territorialization' is not the same as the postmodern-capitalist version, but it nonetheless radically changes the terms of the emancipatory struggle: the enemy is no longer the established hierarchic order of a State. How, then, are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing? Rather than, or more than, a solution to the problems we are facing today, communism is thus itself the name of a problem: of the difficult task of breaking out of the confines of the market-and-state frame, for which no quick formula is at hand: 'It's just the simple thing that's hard, so hard to do', as Brecht put it in his 'In Praise of Communism'.

The Hegelian answer is that the problem/deadlock is its own solution – not in the simple/direct sense that capitalism is already in itself communism, that only a purely formal reversal is needed. My surmise is: what if contemporary dynamic capitalism, precisely in so far as it is 'worldless', a constant disruption of all fixed order, opens up the space for a revolution which will break the vicious cycle of revolt and its reinscription, i.e., which will no longer follow the pattern of an eventual explosion after which things return to normal, but will assume the task of a *new 'ordering' against the global capitalist disorder*? Out of revolt we should move on shamelessly to enforcing a new order. (Is this not one of the lessons of the ongoing financial meltdown?) This is why the focus on capitalism is crucial if we want to reactualize the communist Idea: today's 'worldless' dynamic capitalism radically changes the very coordinates of the communist struggle – the enemy is no longer the State to be undermined from its point of symptomal torsion, but a flux of permanent self-revolutionizing.

Consequently, I want to propose two axioms concerning the relationship between the State and politics. 1) The failure of the Communist State – Party politics is above all and primarily the failure of anti-statist politics, of the endeavour to break out of the constraints of State, to replace statal forms of organization with 'direct' non-representative forms of self-organization ('councils'). 2) If you do not have an idea of what you want to replace the State with, you have no right to subtract/withdraw from the State. Instead of withdrawing into a distance from the State, the true task should be to make the State itself work in a non-statal mode. The alternative 'either struggle for State power (which makes us the same as the enemy we are fighting) or withdraw into a posture of resistance from a distance towards the State' is a false one, because both its terms share the same premise: that a State-form, as we know it, is here to stay, so that all

we can do is take over the State or maintain a distance towards it. Here, one should shamelessly repeat the lesson of Lenin's *The State and Revolution*: the goal of revolutionary violence is not to take over State power, but to transform it, radically changing its functioning, its relation to its base, etc. Therein resides the key component of the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – Bulent Somay is right to point out that what qualifies the proletariat for this position is ultimately a *negative* feature: all other classes are (potentially) capable of reaching the status of the 'ruling class', in other words, of establishing themselves as the class controlling the state apparatus:

what makes the working class into an agency and provides it with a mission is neither its poverty, nor its militant and pseudo-military organization, nor its proximity to the (chiefly industrial) means of production. It is only its structural inability to organize itself into yet another ruling class that provides the working class with such a mission. The proletariat is the only (revolutionary) class in history that abolishes itself in the act of abolishing its opposite.⁷

One should draw from this insight the only appropriate conclusion: the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' is a kind of (necessary) oxymoron, *not* a State-form in which the proletariat is the ruling class. We effectively have the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' only when the State itself is radically transformed, relying on new forms of popular participation. This is why there is more than hypocrisy in the fact that, at the highest point of Stalinism, when the entire social edifice was shattered by purges, the new constitution proclaimed the end of the 'class' character of Soviet power (voting rights were restored to members of classes previously excluded), and that the socialist regimes were called 'people's democracies' – a sure indication that they were not 'dictatorships of the proletariat' ... But, again, how to achieve such a 'dictatorship'?

Peter Sloterdijk (definitely not one of us, but also not a complete idiot) remarked that if there is one person to whom they will build monuments a hundred years from now it is Lee Quan Yew, the Singapore leader who invented and realized so-called 'capitalism with Asian values'. The virus of this authoritarian capitalism is slowly but surely spreading around the globe. Before setting in motion his reforms, Deng Xiaoping visited Singapore and expressly praised it as a model for all of China to follow.

7 Bulent Somay, personal letter (28 January 2007). I am all the more content to quote this passage since his letter is deeply critical of me.

This change has a world-historical meaning: till now, capitalism seemed inextricably linked with democracy – there were, of course, from time to time recourses to direct dictatorship, but, after a decade or two, democracy once again imposed itself (recall only the cases of South Korea and Chile). Now, however, the link between democracy and capitalism has been broken.

Why this resurgence of direct (non-democratic) authority? Above and beyond cultural differences, there is an inner necessity for this resurgence in the very logic of today's capitalism. That is the central problem we are facing today: how does the late-capitalist predominance (or even hegemonic role) of 'intellectual labour' affect Marx's basic scheme of the separation of labour from its objective conditions, and of the revolution as the subjective re-appropriation of those objective conditions? Spheres such as the internet, production, exchange and consumption are inextricably intertwined, potentially even identified: my product is immediately communicated to and consumed by another. Marx's classic notion of commodity fetishism in which 'relations between people' assume the form of 'relations between things' has thus to be radically re-thought: in 'immaterial labour', 'relations between people' are 'not so much hidden beneath the veneer of objectivity, but are themselves the very material of our everyday exploitation',⁸ so we can no longer talk about 'reification' in the classic Lukácsian sense. Far from being invisible, social relationality in its very fluidity is directly the object of marketing and exchange: in 'cultural capitalism', one no longer sells (and buys) objects which 'bring' cultural or emotional experiences, one directly sells (and buys) such experiences.

While one has to acknowledge that Negri is here on the trail of this key question, his answer seems too short; his starting point is Marx's thesis in the *Grundrisse* on the radical transformation of the status of 'fixed capital':

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process.⁹

8 Nina Power, 'Dissing', *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March–April 2009): 55.

9 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 706.

With the development of general social knowledge, the 'productive power of labour' is thus 'itself the greatest productive power. From the standpoint of the direct production process it can be regarded as the production of fixed capital, this fixed capital being man himself.'¹⁰ And, again, since capital organizes its exploitation by appearing as 'fixed capital' against living labour, the moment the key component of fixed capital is 'man himself', its 'general social knowledge', the very social foundation of capitalist exploitation is undermined, and the role of capital becomes purely parasitic: with today's global interactive media, creative inventiveness is no longer individual, it is immediately collectivized, part of 'commons', such that any attempt to privatize it through copyrighting becomes problematic – more and more literally, 'property is theft' here. So what about a company like Microsoft that does precisely this – organizing and exploiting the collective synergy of creative cognitive singularities? The only remaining task seems to be to imagine how cognitive workers will 'eliminate bosses, because an industrial control over cognitive work is completely *dépassé*'.¹¹ What new social movements signal is that 'the wage epoch is over, and that we have passed from the confrontation between work and capital concerning wages to the confrontation between the multitude and the State concerning the instauration of the citizen's income'.¹² Therein resides the basic feature of 'today's social revolutionary transition': 'One has to bring capital to recognize the weight and importance of the common good, and if capital is not ready to do it, one has to compel it to do so.'¹³ Note Negri's precise formulation: not abolish capital, but compel it to recognize the common good, i.e., one remains within capitalism – if ever there was a utopian idea, this is it. Here is how Negri describes the proximity of today's biopolitical capitalism to the direct assertion of the productivity of the multitude:

The picture is one of a circulation of commodities, webs of information, continuous movements, and radical nomadism of labour, and the ferocious exploitation of these dynamics . . . but also of constant and inexhaustible *excess*, of the biopolitical power of the multitude and of its excess with regard to the structural controlling ability of dominant institutions. All of the available energies are put to work, society is put to work . . . Within this exploited totality and injunction to work

10 Ibid.

11 Toni Negri, *Goodbye Mr Socialism* (Rome: Feltrinelli, 2006), p. 234.

12 Ibid., p. 204.

13 Ibid., p. 235.

lies an intransitive freedom that is irreducible to the control that tries to subdue it. Even though freedom can run against itself . . . lines of flight still open up in this ambivalence: suffering is often productive but never revolutionary; what is revolutionary is excess, overflow, and power.¹⁴

What we find here is the standard post-Hegelian matrix of the productive flux which is always in excess with regard to the structural totality which tries to subdue and control it. But what if, in a parallax shift, we perceive the capitalist network itself as the true excess over the flow of the productive multitude? What if, while the contemporary production of multitude directly produces life, it continues to produce an excess (which is even functionally superfluous), the excess of Capital? Why do immediately produced relations still need the mediating role of capitalist relations? What if the true enigma is: why does the continuous nomadic 'molecular' movement need a parasitic 'molar' structure which (deceptively) appears as an obstacle to its unleashed productivity? Why do we, the moment we abolish this obstacle/excess, lose the very productive flux constrained by the parasitic excess? This also means that we should turn around the topic of fetishism, of 'relations between people appearing as relations between things': what if the direct 'production of life' celebrated by Hardt and Negri is falsely transparent, what if, in it, the invisible 'relations between (the immaterial, true) things (of Capital) appear as direct relations between people'?

How did we come to this? The 1968 protests focused their struggles against (what were perceived as) the three pillars of capitalism: factory, school, family. As a result, each domain was subsequently submitted to post-industrial transformation: factory-work is increasingly outsourced or, in the developed world at least, reorganized on the basis of post-Fordist non-hierarchical interactive team-work; permanent flexible privatized education is increasingly replacing universal public education; multiple forms of flexible sexual arrangements are replacing the traditional family.¹⁵ The left lost in the very moment of its victory: the immediate enemy was defeated, but replaced by a new form of even more direct capitalist domination. In 'postmodern' capitalism, the market is invading new spheres which were hitherto considered the privileged domain of the State, from education to prisons and security. When 'immaterial

14 Toni Negri, 'On Rem Koolhaas', *Radical Philosophy* 154 (March–April 2009): 49.

15 See Daniel Cohen, *Trois leçons sur la société post-industrielle* (Paris: Seuil, 2006).

work' (education, therapy, etc.) is celebrated as the kind of work which directly produces social relations, one should not forget what this means within a commodity-economy: that new domains, hitherto excluded from the market, are now commodified – when in trouble, we no longer talk to a friend but pay a psychiatrist or counsellor to take care of the problem; not parents but paid babysitters or educators take care of children, etc. We are thus in the midst of a new process of the privatization of the social, of establishing new enclosures.

To grasp these new forms of privatization, we need to critically transform Marx's conceptual apparatus. Because he neglected the social dimension of 'general intellect', Marx didn't envisage the possibility of *the privatization of the 'general intellect' itself* – this is what lies at the core of the struggle for 'intellectual property'. Negri is right here: within this framework, exploitation in the classic Marxist sense is no longer possible – which is why it has to be enforced more and more by direct legal measures, i.e., by a non-economic force. This is why, today, the exploitation increasingly takes the form of rent: as Carlo Vercellone put it, post-industrial capitalism is characterized by the 'becoming-rent of profit'.¹⁶ And this is why direct authority is needed: it is needed in order to impose the (arbitrary) legal conditions for extracting rent, conditions which are no longer 'spontaneously' generated by the market. Perhaps therein resides the fundamental 'contradiction' of today's 'postmodern' capitalism: while its logic is deregulatory, 'anti-statal', nomadic/deterritorializing, etc., its key tendency towards the 'becoming-rent-of-profit' signals the strengthening role of the State whose (not only) regulatory function is ever more omnipresent. Dynamic de-territorialization coexists with and relies on increasingly authoritarian interventions of the State and its legal and other apparatuses. What can be discerned at the horizon of our historical becoming is thus a society in which personal libertarianism and hedonism coexist with (and are sustained by) a complex web of regulatory state mechanisms. Far from disappearing, the State is today gaining in strength.

In other words, when, due to the crucial role of the 'general intellect' (knowledge and social cooperation) in the creation of wealth, forms of wealth are increasingly 'out of all proportion to the direct labour time spent on their production', the result is not, as Marx seems to have expected, the self-dissolution of capitalism, but the gradual relative transformation of the profit generated by the exploitation of the labour force

into rent appropriated by the privatization of the 'general intellect'. Take the case of Bill Gates: how did he become the richest man in the world? His wealth has nothing to do with the production costs involved in the products Microsoft sells (one can even argue that Microsoft pays its intellectual workers relatively high salaries). It is not the result of his success in producing good software at lower prices than his competitors, or in higher levels of 'exploitation' of his hired intellectual workers. If this were the case, Microsoft would have gone bankrupt long ago: people en masse would have chosen programmes like Linux, which are both free and, according to specialists, better than Microsoft's. Why, then, are millions still buying Microsoft? Because Microsoft has succeeded in imposing itself as an almost universal standard, (almost) monopolizing the field, a kind of direct embodiment of the 'general intellect'. Gates became the richest man on earth within a couple of decades by appropriating the rent received from allowing millions of intellectual workers to participate in that particular form of the 'general intellect' that he privatized and controls. Is it true, then, that today's intellectual workers are no longer separated from the objective conditions of their labour (they own their PCs, etc.), which is Marx's description of capitalist 'alienation'? Superficially yes, but more fundamentally *no*: they remain cut off from the social field of their work, from the 'general intellect' – because the latter is mediated by private capital.

And the same goes for natural resources, the exploitation of which is one of the great sources of rent today, accompanied by the permanent struggle over who is to receive that rent – the people of the Third World or Western corporations. The supreme irony is that in order to explain the difference between labour power (which, when put to work, produces surplus value over and above its own value) and other commodities (the value of which is consumed in their use and which thus involve no exploitation), Marx mentions as an example of an 'ordinary' commodity *oil*, the very commodity which is today a source of extraordinary 'profits'. Here also, it is meaningless to link the rise and fall of oil prices to rising or falling production costs or the price of exploited labour – the production costs are negligible, the price we pay for oil is a rent we pay to the owners of this resource because of its scarcity and limited supply.

It is as if the three components of the production process – intellectual planning and marketing, material production, the providing of material resources – are more and more autonomized, emerging as three separate spheres. In its social consequences, this separation appears in the

16 See Carlo Vercellone (ed.), *Capitalismo cognitivo* (Rome: manifestolibri, 2006).

guise of the 'three main classes' of today's developed societies, which are precisely *not* classes but three fractions of the working class: intellectual labourers, the old manual working class, and the outcasts (unemployed, or living in slums and other interstices of the public space). The working class is thus split into three, each part with its own 'way of life' and ideology: the enlightened hedonism and liberal multiculturalism of the intellectual class, the populist fundamentalism of the working class, and the more extreme, singular forms of the outcast fraction. In Hegelese, this triad is clearly the triad of the universal (intellectual workers), particular (manual workers), and singular (outcasts). The outcome of this process is the gradual disintegration of social life proper, of a public space in which all three fractions could meet – and 'identity' politics in all its forms is a supplement for this loss. Identity politics acquires a specific form in each of the three fractions: postmodern multicultural identity politics in the intellectual class, regressive populist fundamentalism in the working class, half-illegal initiatic groups (criminal gangs, religious sects, etc.) among the outcasts. What they all share is recourse to a particular identity as a substitute for the missing universal public space.

The proletariat is thus divided into three, each part played off against the others: intellectual labourers full of cultural prejudices against the 'redneck' workers; workers who display a populist hatred of intellectuals and outcasts; outcasts who are antagonistic to society as such. The old call 'Proletarians, unite!' is thus more pertinent than ever: in the new conditions of 'post-industrial' capitalism, the unity of the three fractions of the working class *is* already their victory.¹⁷

17 Maximilien Robespierre, *Virtue and Terror* (London and New York: Verso, 2007), p. 129.