

7 'Communism of the Intellect, Communism of the Will'

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Posing the question of communism in terms of its 'idea' has at least two initial virtues.¹

In the first place, it helps to distinguish communism from its reduction purely and simply to anti-capitalism. Of course the critique of capitalism is the central concern of Marx's mature work, and remains an essential part of any account that might try to anticipate an eventual transition to a communist mode of production. Of course capitalism establishes and then intensifies some of the historical conditions within which it became possible, for the first time, to pursue the abolition of classes and inequalities in more than merely utopian terms. But to privilege the destruction of capitalism over the construction of communism is to concede too much to capitalism itself. In so far as communism is conceived only as a more or less 'inevitable' consequence of capitalism's self-destruction its formulation remains limited and compromised by the history it seeks to overcome: the more we insist that in order to think communism we must first wait for capitalism to create the conditions for its eventual self-destruction, the harder it becomes to distinguish anti-capitalist resistance from an effectively pro-capitalist enthusiasm for the full subsumption of all aspects of social life within a single, globally integrated machinery of production.

In the second place, emphasis on the idea of communism invites a certain amount of free or 'reckless' speculation, a reflection on communism as a project or possibility independent of the legacy of formerly existing communism. It rightly encourages us to dismiss as secondary the questions forever posed by the sceptical and the disillusioned, or those who want to inspect the full solution to a problem before they are willing to begin tackling the problem itself. How dare we talk about communism, they say, when we haven't come up with viable large-scale alternatives to

¹ A considerably longer version of the second and third parts of this chapter first appeared under the title 'The Will of the People: Notes Towards a Dialectical Voluntarism', *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May–June 2009).

the market, when we haven't solved the problem of a centralized bureaucratic state, when we haven't exorcized the ghosts of Stalin or Mao, etc. This sort of objection reminds me a little of the way otherwise 'progressive' people once talked about the end of slavery in the United States. Even a genuine democrat like Thomas Jefferson, along with virtually all his revolutionary contemporaries, balked at the question of emancipation or abolition because they could not yet imagine a practicable solution to the problem they had inherited and accepted: they could not imagine (apart from fantasies of back-to-Africa deportation) how racial reconciliation might proceed after abolition, given the legacy of brutality and resentment it had created. A similar lack of political imagination serves to preserve the still dominant sense that 'there is no alternative', and to keep communism, along with a few other ideas, firmly off the agenda.

We would do better, I think, to follow the example given by people like Robespierre, Toussaint L'Ouverture or John Brown: confronted with an indefensible institution like slavery, when the opportunity arose they resolved to work immediately and by all available means for its elimination. Che Guevara and Paulo Freire would do the same in the face of imperialism and oppression. Today Dr Paul Farmer and his 'Partners in Health', in Haiti, Chile and elsewhere, adopt a somewhat similar approach when confronted by indefensible inequalities in the global provision of health care.² In each case the basic logic is as simple as could be: an idea, like the idea of communism, or equality, or justice, commands that we should strive to realize it without compromises or delay, before the means of such realization have been recognized as feasible or legitimate, or even 'possible'. It is the deliberate striving towards realization itself that will convert the impossible into the possible, and explode the parameters of the feasible.

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Marx himself was not tempted to write 'recipes for the cook-shops of the future',³ and was famously reluctant to expand on the idea of communism. But, as is widely recognized, in Marx this idea evokes two distinct concerns. On the one hand reference to communism serves as a guid-

² The Partners in Health website is www.pih.org; cf. Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer* (New York: Random House, 2004).

³ Karl Marx, *Capital I*, postface to the second edition, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1976), p. 98.

ing norm, the anticipation of a society organized in keeping with the old slogan, adapted from Babeuf and then Louis Blanc, 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'.⁴ Communism in this sense serves as a guiding principle for future development. 'In place of the old bourgeois society', as the *Manifesto* puts it, 'with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.'⁵ To work towards such an association is to strive to actualize that 'realm of freedom' which for Marx, as for Kant and Hegel before him, informs our most essential normative principle: the autonomous deployment of 'human energy as an end in itself'.⁶ On the other hand, for the Marx who is relentlessly critical of merely 'utopian' forms of socialism, communism names an actual historical project. 'Communism is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the real movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the premises now in existence.'⁷

Debate over how best to understand the integration of these two concerns has divided partisans of the communist project from the beginning. A version of Kant's prescription of a rational principle independent of all merely empirical instantiation (an idea as 'regulative ideal') still stands at one pole of the argument; a version of Hegel's insistence on concrete, historical and institutional mediation (an idea as 'unity of concept and actuality') stands at the other. It's easy enough to recognize these two poles in the work of the two people who have sponsored this conference, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek – and the comparison has often been made, not least by Žižek himself.

Badiou's refusal to compromise with the 'necessary movement of history' during the profoundly reactionary period that began in the mid 1970s has helped him to remain the most forceful and significant political thinker of

⁴ Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1972), p. 17.

⁵ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1965), p. 59.

⁶ Marx, *Capital III* (Moscow: Progress, 1966), p. 820.

⁷ Or again, in the more emphatically Hegelian terms of the third 1844 manuscript: 'Communism as the positive supersession of private property as human self-estrangement, and hence as the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e., human, being – a restoration which has become conscious . . . Communism is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be the solution' (Marx, *Economic and Social Manuscripts*, in Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton [London: Penguin Books, 1975], p. 348).

his generation. He is perhaps the only great philosopher of his day who has never qualified his commitment to the revolutionary ideals of universal justice and equality. His philosophy also provides some resources for thinking the 'situated' character of a universal truth, for instance its localization in an 'evental site', or its incorporation in a 'body' shaped by regional norms of appearing or existence. Nevertheless, Badiou's insistence on the exceptional and autonomous status of an 'immortal truth' lends some force to Žižek's characterization of his philosophy as broadly Kantian in its orientation. Badiou's lifelong insistence on the primacy of formalization, on the subtraction of thought from its mediation through experience, history or relation, on the priority of Plato over Aristotle, on the generally 'thoughtless' configuration of the world in its mundane normality, etc., all indicate the more or less 'extra-worldly' bias of his conception of truth. For Badiou, a truth is not so much articulated with and through the world as it is excepted or subtracted from it, and for that very reason invested with an absolute and eternal capacity to change it.

This extra-worldly orientation continues to guide Badiou's recent reformulation of the 'communist hypothesis' itself. This reformulation assumes that 'our problem is neither that of the popular movement conceived as the vehicle of a new hypothesis', as during the 'classic' period of Marxist innovation in the mid-nineteenth century, 'nor that of the proletarian party conceived as leading it towards victory', as in a twentieth century marked by Lenin and Mao.⁸ Rather than rework and strengthen central aspects of previous contributions to the communist project, Badiou seems willing to abandon them in favour of an axiomatic principle explicitly conceived as a sort of guiding norm or ideal, rather than as a concretely mediated imperative. 'It's a matter of a regulative Idea, to use Kant's terms, and not of a programme.'⁹ Badiou is prepared to pay a high price to preserve this Idea in its regulative purity.

Marxism, the workers' movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the socialist state – all these remarkable inventions of the twentieth century – are not really useful to us any more. At the theoretical level they certainly deserve further study and consideration; but at the level of practical politics they have become unworkable [*impraticables*].¹⁰

⁸ Alain Badiou, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom? Circonstance*, 4 (cf p. 53, n. 44, Paris: Lignes, 2007), p. 150.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

Similar priorities may help to explain Badiou's relative lack of interest in recent political mobilizations in places like Bolivia, Ecuador and other Latin American countries, mobilizations that Badiou sometimes presents (on account of their apparent failure to 'advance' beyond Mao's conception of politics) as the political equivalent of mathematicians who, oblivious to the revolutionary developments of the nineteenth century, continue to remain faithful to the old Euclidean form of geometry.

Žižek, by contrast, sometimes courts the opposite danger. He experiments with the different ways in which thought and action might converge if not identify with the 'real movement that abolishes the existing state of things'. After Hegel, he conceives of freedom and truth primarily in terms of their concrete or material realization; in the process he tends to downplay autonomous and deliberate self-determination in favour of an 'extimate' process of extra-voluntary compulsion or 'drive'. The more Žižek valorizes the remorseless imperatives of unconscious drive, the more he deprives the prescription of radical political action of any clear and consistent criteria other than those of radicality itself. Depending on the situation, Žižek may urge us to withdraw and 'do *nothing*' (in moments when 'the truly violent act is doing nothing, a refusal to act'), or to embrace the impossible and thus 'do *everything*' (as illustrated by Stalin's 'revolution from above'), or again (on the model of Aristide or Chávez) to adopt the more pragmatic posture of someone who is at least prepared to 'do *something*', by accepting some of the compromises that accompany a readiness to take and retain state power.

As for Marx himself, the 'ideal' and the 'real' aspects of communism were held together by the process that works to abolish the capitalist regime of property, exploitation and inequality. 'The distinguishing feature of communism', says the *Manifesto*, 'is not the abolition of property generally, but the abolition of bourgeois property . . . [i.e.] property, in its present form, [which] is based on the antagonism of capital and wage labour' and the exploitation of the one by the other.¹¹ Though for Marx such abolition only becomes a viable project under the specific historical conditions of advanced capitalism, it remains first and foremost a *project* or task. What is most fundamental in Marx, it seems to me, is not the 'inevitable' or involuntary process whereby capitalism might seem to dig its own grave, but rather the way in which it prepares the ground upon which the determined diggers might appear. What is decisive is the

¹¹ Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, p. 49.

deliberate process of this digging itself. 'The emancipation of the working classes', stipulates the well-known opening sentence of the rules Marx drafted for the First International, 'must be conquered by the working classes themselves.'¹²

The best way to describe Marx's project, then, is as an effort 'not only to make History but to get a grip on it, practically and theoretically'.¹³ Even his most apparently anti-voluntarist work is geared first and foremost to showing 'how the will to change capitalism can develop into successful transformative (revolutionary) activity'.¹⁴ In the early manuscripts this emphasis is explicit. The 'actual act of creation of communism – the birth of its empirical existence – and, for its thinking consciousness, the *comprehended* and known movement of its *becoming*', just as the proletarian movement is 'the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority' of the people.¹⁵ In his later critique of political economy, Marx anticipates that the concentration of capital and the intensification of exploitation and misery which accompanies it will lead not to the automatic collapse of capitalism but to a growth in the size, frequency and intensity of 'the revolt of the working-class'. It is this class which will have to carry out the deliberate work of 'expropriating the expropriators'.¹⁶ Once victorious, this same class will preside over the establishment of a mode of production marked above all by the predominance of autonomy, mastery, purpose and freedom. The newly 'associated producers [will] regulate their interchange with nature rationally and bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power' – and thus enable affirmation of human creativity and 'energy [as] an end in itself'.¹⁷ The free association of producers will displace capital as the 'pseudo-subject' of production and society. The Paris Commune of 1871 anticipates such an outcome in a limited and short-lived form, through the implementation of communist forms of association undertaken by 'working men who have taken the work of their emancipation into their own

12 Marx, 'Rules and Administrative Regulations of the International Workingmen's Association' (1867), in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975–2005), vol. XX, 441; cf. Hal Draper, 'The Two Souls of Socialism' *New Politics*, 5:1 (1966), pp. 57–84, and Draper, 'The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels', *Socialist Register*, 8 (1971), pp. 81–109.

13 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 89.

14 Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho, *Marx's Capital* (London: Pluto, 2003), pp. 11–12.

15 Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 348; Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 45.

16 Marx, *Capital I*, p. 929; cf. Marx, *Civil War in France* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), pp. 75–6.

17 Marx, *Capital III*, Chapter 48; cf. Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 611, 705–6.

hands with a will'. In the process the Communards made, Marx notes, the 'impossible' possible.¹⁸

Understood in this sense, we might say that communism seeks to enable the conversion of work into will. Communism aims to complete the transition, via the struggle of collective self-emancipation, from a suffered necessity to autonomous self-determination. It is the deliberate effort, on a world-historical scale, to universalize the material conditions under which free voluntary action might prevail over involuntary labour or passivity. Or rather: communism is the project through which voluntary action seeks to universalize the conditions for voluntary action.

2

Only such a 'communism of the will', it seems to me, can integrate the two dimensions of its idea, the dimensions of principled ideal and material development, and thereby align a revolutionary theory with a revolutionary practice. In the process it will invent new ways for testing the truth expressed in the old cliché, 'where there's a will there's a way'. Or to adapt Antonio Machado's less prosaic phrase, taken up as a motto by Paulo Freire: a communist assumes that if 'there is no way, we make the way by walking it'.¹⁹

To say that we make the way by walking it is to resist the power of the historical, cultural or socio-economic terrain to determine our way. It is to insist that in an emancipatory political sequence what is 'determinant in the first instance' is a collective will to prescribe, through the terrain that confronts us, the course of our own history. It is to privilege, over the complexity of the terrain and the forms of knowledge and authority that govern behaviour 'adapted' to it, the purposeful will of the people to take and retain their place as the 'authors and actors of their own drama'.²⁰

To say that we make our way by walking it is not to pretend, however,

18 'Yes, gentlemen, the Commune intended to abolish that class property which makes the labour of the many the wealth of the few. It aimed at the expropriation of the expropriators. It wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. But this is communism, "impossible" communism! . . . If co-operative production is not to remain a sham and a snare; if it is to supersede the capitalist system; if united co-operative societies are to regulate national production upon a common plan, thus taking it under their own control, and putting an end to the constant anarchy and periodical convulsions which are the fatality of capitalist production – what else, gentlemen, would it be but communism, "possible" communism?' (Marx, *Civil War in France*, pp. 75–6).

19 Antonio Machado, 'Proverbios y Cantares – XXIX' (1912), in *Selected Poems of Antonio Machado*, trans. Betty Jean Craige (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978).

20 Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), p. 109.

that we invent the ground we traverse. It is not to suppose that a will creates itself and the conditions of its exercise abruptly or ex nihilo. It is not to assume that the real movement which abolishes the existing state of things proceeds through empty or indeterminate space. It is not to disregard the obstacles or opportunities that characterize a particular terrain, or to deny their ability to influence the forging of a way. Instead it is to remember, after Sartre, that obstacles appear as such in the light of a project to climb past them. It is to remember, after Marx, that we make our own history, without choosing the conditions of its making. It is to conceive of terrain and way through a dialectic which, connecting both objective and subjective forms of determination, is oriented by the primacy of the latter.

In a European context, the optimism characteristic of such an approach is still emphatic in Gramsci (who seeks 'to put the "will", which in the last analysis equals practical or political activity, at the base of philosophy'²¹) and in the early writings of Lukács (for whom 'decision', 'subjective will' and 'free action' have strategic precedence over the apparent 'facts' of a situation²²). Comparable priorities also orient the political writings of a few more recent philosophers, like Beauvoir, Sartre and Badiou. Obvious differences aside, what these thinkers have in common is an emphasis on the practical primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation. However constrained your situation you are always free, as Sartre liked to say, 'to make something of what is made of you'.²³

Overall, however, it is difficult to think of a canonical notion more roundly condemned, in recent 'Western' philosophy, than the notion of will, to say nothing of that general will so widely condemned as a precursor of tyranny and totalitarian terror. In philosophical circles voluntarism has become little more than a term of abuse, and an impressively versatile one at that: depending on the context, it can evoke idealism, obscurantism, vitalism, infantile leftism, fascism, petty-bourgeois narcissism, neocon aggression, folk-psychological delusion . . . Of all the faculties or capacities of that human subject who was displaced from the centre

21 Antonio Gramsci, 'Study of Philosophy', *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), p. 345; cf. Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince', in *ibid.*, pp. 125–33, 171–2.

22 Georg Lukács, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?', in *Political Writings 1919–1929*, ed. Rodney Livingstone, trans. Michael McColgan (London: NLB, 1972), pp. 26–7; cf. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 23, 145, 181.

23 Sartre, *Search for a Method*, p. 91; Sartre, 'Itinerary of a Thought', *New Left Review* 58 (November 1969): 45.

of post-Sartrean concerns, none was more firmly proscribed than its conscious volition. Structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers, by and large, relegated volition and intention to the domain of deluded, imaginary or humanist-ideological miscognition. Rather than explore the ways in which political determination might depend on a collective subject's self-determination, recent philosophy and cultural theory has tended to privilege various forms of either indetermination (the interstitial, the hybrid, the ambivalent, the simulated, the undecidable, the chaotic . . .) or hyper-determination ('infinite' ethical obligation, divine transcendence, unconscious drive, traumatic repression, machinic automation . . .). The allegedly obsolete notion of a *pueblo unido* has been displaced by a more differentiated and more deferential plurality of actors – flexible identities, negotiable histories, improvised organizations, dispersed networks, 'vital' multitudes, polyvalent assemblages, and so on.

Even the most cursory overview of recent European philosophy is enough to evoke its general tendency to distrust, suspend or overcome the will – a tendency anticipated, in an extreme form, by Schopenhauer. Consider a few names from a list that could be easily expanded. Nietzsche's whole project presumes that 'there is no such thing as will' in the usual (voluntary, deliberate, purposeful . . .) sense of the word.²⁴ Heidegger, over the course of his own lectures on Nietzsche, comes to condemn the will as a force of subjective domination and nihilist closure, before urging his readers 'willingly to renounce willing'.²⁵ Arendt finds, in the affirmation of a popular political will ('the most dangerous of modern concepts and misconceptions'), the temptation that turns modern revolutionaries into tyrants.²⁶ For Adorno, rational will is an aspect of that enlightenment pursuit of mastery and control which has left the earth 'radiant with triumphant calamity'. Althusser devalues the will as an aspect of ideology, in favour of the scientific analysis of historical processes that proceed without a subject. Negri and Virno associate a will of the people with authoritarian state power. After Nietzsche, Deleuze privileges transformative sequences that require the suspension, shattering or paralysis of voluntary action. After Heidegger, Derrida associates the will with self-presence and self-coincidence, an unredeemably futile effort to appropriate the inappropriable (the unrepresentable, the equivocal, the undecidable, the differential, the deferred, the discordant, the

24 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), §488.

25 Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), p. 59.

26 Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 225.

transcendent, the other . . .). After these and several other philosophers, Agamben summarizes much recent European thinking on political will when he effectively equates it with fascism pure and simple. Even those thinkers who, against the grain of the times, have insisted on the primacy of self-determination and self-emancipation have tended to do so in ways that devalue political will. Take Foucault, Sartre and Badiou. Much of Foucault's work might be read as an extended analysis, after Canguilhem, of the ways in which people are 'de-voluntarized' by the 'permanent coercions' at work in disciplinary power, coercions designed to establish 'not the general will but automatic docility'.²⁷ Foucault never compromised on his affirmation of 'voluntary insubordination' in the face of newly stifling forms of government and power, and in crucial lectures from the early 1970s he demonstrated how the development of modern psychiatric and carceral power, in the immediate wake of the French Revolution, was designed first and foremost to 'over-power' and break the will of people who had the folly literally to 'take themselves for a king'.²⁸ Nevertheless, in his published work Foucault tends to see the will as complicit in forms of self-supervision, self-regulation and self-subjection. Sartre probably did more than any other philosopher of his generation to emphasize the ways in which an emancipatory project or group depends upon the determination of a 'concrete will', but his philosophy offers a problematic basis for any sort of voluntarism. He accepts as 'irreducible' the 'intention' and goals which orient an individual's fundamental project, but makes a sharp distinction between such intention and merely 'voluntary deliberation' or motivation. Since for Sartre the latter is always secondary and 'deceptive', the result is to render the primary intention opaque and beyond 'interpretation'.²⁹ Sartre's later work subsequently fails to conceive of a collective will in other than exceptionalist and ephemeral terms. Badiou's powerful revival of a militant theory of the subject is more easily reconciled with a voluntarist agenda (or at least with what he calls a *volonté impure*³⁰), but suffers from some similar limitations. It's no accident that, like Agamben and Žižek, when Badiou looks to the Christian tradition

27 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), p. 169.

28 Foucault, 'What Is Critique?', in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (New York: Semiotext(e), 1997), p. 32; Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 11, 27–8, 339.

29 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), pp. 585–6, 472, 479.

30 Badiou, 'La Volonté: Cours d'agrégation', notes taken by François Nicolas, available at www.entretiens.asso.fr.

for a point of anticipation he turns not to Matthew (with his prescriptions of how to act in the world: spurn the rich, affirm the poor, 'sell all thou hast' . . .), or to liberation theology's 'preferential option for the poor', but to Paul (with his contempt for the weakness of human will and his valorization of the abrupt and infinite transcendence of grace).

Pending a more robust philosophical defence, contemporary critical theorists tend to dismiss the notion of will as a matter of delusion or deviation. But since it amounts to little more than a perverse appropriation of more fundamental forms of revolutionary determination, there is no reason to accept fascist exaltation of an 'awakening' or 'triumph of the will' as the last word on the subject. The true innovators in the modern development of a voluntarist philosophy are Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, and the general principles of such a philosophy are most easily recognized in the praxis of Rousseau's Jacobin followers.

Of course the gulf that separates Marxist from Jacobin conceptions of political action is obvious enough. In the movement from Rousseau to Marx, via Kant and Hegel, the category of a 'general will' expands from the anachronistic idealization of a small homogeneous community towards an anticipation of humanity as a whole. Kant's abstract universalization makes too sharp a distinction between determination of the will and its realization, between determination in its subjective and objective senses; Hegel goes too far in the other direction. I will assume here that the most fruitful way to begin thinking a dialectical voluntarism that might eventually draw on aspects of Kant, Hegel and Marx is to *start* with a return to Rousseau and the Jacobins, supplemented by reference to more recent interventions that might be described in roughly neo-Jacobin terms. Rousseau's conception of a general will remains the single most important contribution to the logic at work in the sort of 'dialectical voluntarism' that informs a communism of the will. Unlike Rousseau or Hegel, however, my concern here is not with a community conceived as a socially or ethically integrated unit, one that finds its natural horizon in the nation-state, so much as with the people who participate in the active willing of a general or generalizable will as such. Such a will is at work in the mobilization of any emancipatory collective force – a national liberation struggle, a movement for social justice, an empowering political or economic association, and so on – which strives to formulate, assert and sustain a fully common (and thus fully inclusive and egalitarian) interest.

3

On this basis we might briefly enumerate, along broadly neo-Jacobin or proto-communist lines, some of the characteristic features of emancipatory political will:

1. Political *will* commands, by definition, voluntary and autonomous action. Unlike involuntary or reflex-like responses, if it exists then will initiates action through free, rational deliberation. For Rousseau the fundamental 'principle of any action lies in the will of a free being; there is no higher or deeper source', and as Patrick Riley notes, according to Rousseau's conception of both politics and education, 'without will there is no freedom, no self-determination, no "moral causality"'.³¹ Robespierre soon drew the most basic political implication when he realized that when people will or 'want to be free they will be'. Abbé Sieyès anticipated the point, on the eve of 1789: 'every man has an inherent right to deliberate and will for himself', and 'either one wills freely or one is forced to will, there cannot be any middle position'. Outside voluntary self-legislation 'there cannot be anything other than the empire of the strong over the weak and its odious consequences'.³²

An intentional freedom is not reducible to the mere faculty of free choice or *liberum arbitrium*.³³ If we are to speak of the 'will of the people' we cannot restrict it (as Machiavelli and his followers do) to the passive expression of approval or consent.³⁴ It is the process of actively willing or choosing that renders a particular course of action preferable to another. 'Always engaged', argues Sartre, freedom never 'pre-exists its choice: we shall never apprehend ourselves except as a choice in the making'.³⁵ Augustine and then Duns Scotus already understood that 'our will would not be will unless it

31 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l'éducation*, (Paris: Garnier, 1964), p. 340; Patrick Riley, 'Rousseau's General Will: Freedom of a Particular Kind', *Political Studies* 39 (1991): 69, citing Rousseau, *Première version du Contrat social*, in *Political Writings*, Charles Vaughan ed., (New York: Wiley, 1962), I, p. 499.

32 Maximilien Robespierre, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Eugène Déprez et al. (Paris: Société des Études Robespierriennes, 1910–1967), vol. 9, p. 310; Emmanuel Joseph Sieyès, *Views of the Executive Means Available to the Representatives of France in 1789*, *Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael Sonenscher (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), p. 10.

33 Cf. Arendt, 'Willing', in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt, 1978), II, pp. 6–7.

34 Machiavelli, *Discourses*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Nathan Tarcov (London: Penguin, 1983), 2:24, 3:5; cf. 1:16, 1:32; Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin, 2004), Chapter 9.

35 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 501.

were in our power'.³⁶ Descartes likewise recognized that 'voluntary and free are the same thing', and finds in the 'indivisible' and immeasurable freedom of the will our most fundamental resemblance to divinity.³⁷ Kant (followed by Fichte) then radicalizes this voluntarist approach when he defines the activity of willing as 'causality through reason' or 'causality through freedom'.³⁸ For Kant, will achieves the practical liberation of reason from the constraints of experience and objective knowledge, and it is the active willing which determines what is possible and what is right, and makes it so. As the French Revolution will confirm, it is as willing or practical beings that 'people have the quality or power of being the *cause* and . . . *author* of their own improvement'.³⁹ Those sceptical of political will, by contrast, assume that apparently voluntary commitments mask a more profound ignorance or devaluation of appetite (Hobbes), causality (Spinoza), context (Montesquieu), habit (Hume), tradition (Burke), history (Tocqueville), power (Nietzsche), the unconscious (Freud), convention (Wittgenstein), writing (Derrida), desire (Deleuze), drive (Žižek) . . .

2. *Political* will, of course, involves collective action and direct participation. A democratic political will depends on the power and practice of inclusive assembly, the power to sustain a common commitment. The assertion of what Rousseau calls a general will is a matter of collective volition at every stage of its development. The inaugural 'association is the most voluntary act in the world', and to remain an active participant of the association 'is to will what is in the common or general interest'. In so far (and only in so far) as they pursue this interest, each person 'puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme control of the general will'.⁴⁰ Defined in this way, 'the general will is always on the side most favourable to the public

36 Saint Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will*, trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 76–7; cf. Duns Scotus, 'The Existence of God', in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Allan Wolter (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), pp. 54–6.

37 René Descartes, Letter to Père Mesland, 9 February 1645, in John Cottingham et al. (eds), *Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), vol. 3, p. 246; Descartes, *Meditations IV*, *ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 39–40; *Principles of Philosophy*, *ibid.* vol. 1, §35, §37.

38 Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in his *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); references to Kant use the standard German pagination), pp. 4:461, 4:446. In his 1930 lectures on Kant's practical philosophy, Heidegger emphasizes this point – 'to give this priority in everything, to will the ought of pure willing' (Heidegger, *Essence of Human Freedom*, trans. Ted Sadler [London: Continuum, 2002], p. 201).

39 Kant, 'The Contest of the Faculties', in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 181.

40 Rousseau, *Social Contract*, in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, eds. Alan Ritter and Julia Conaway Bondanella (New York: Norton, 1988), pp. 4:2, 1:6.

interest, that is to say, the most equitable, so that it is necessary merely to be just to be assured of following the general will'.⁴¹

A general interest exists only if the will to pursue it is stronger than the distraction of particular interests. To say that a general will is 'strong' doesn't mean that it stifles dissent or imposes uniformity. It means that in the process of negotiating differences between particular wills, the willing of the general interest eventually finds a way to prevail. There is an inclusive general will in so far as those who initially oppose it correct their mistake and realize that 'if my private opinion had prevailed I would have done something other than what I had willed', i.e. something inconsistent with my ongoing participation in the general will.⁴² So long as it lasts, participation in a general will, be it that of a national movement, a political organization, a social or economic association, a trade union, etc., always involves a resolve to abide by its eventual judgement, not as an immediate arbiter of right and wrong but as the process of collectively deliberating and *willing* what is right. Participation in a general will involves acceptance of the risk of finding yourself being, at any given moment, 'wrong with the people rather than right without them'.⁴³ By the same token, it's precisely in so far as it remains actively capable of seeking and willing the collective right that we can agree with Rousseau and Sieyès when they insist that, in the long run, a general will can neither err nor betray.⁴⁴

After Robespierre, Saint-Just summarizes the whole Jacobin political project when he rejects 'purely speculative' or 'intellectual' conceptions of justice, as if 'laws were the expression of taste rather than of the general will'. The only legitimate definition of the general will is 'the material will of the people, its simultaneous will; its goal is to consecrate the active and not the passive interest of the greatest number of people'.⁴⁵

Mobilization of the general will of the people must not be confused, then, with a merely putschist vanguardism. An abrupt appropriation of the instruments of government by a few 'alchemists of revolution' is no substitute for the deployment of popular power.⁴⁶ In spite of obvious stra-

41 Ibid., p. 2:4; Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', in *Rousseau's Political Writings*, p. 66.

42 Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 4:2; Louis Antoine de Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes*, eds. Anne Kupiec and Miguel Abensour (Paris: Gallimard 'Folio', 2004), p. 482.

43 Jean-Bertrand Aristide, cited in J. P. Slavin, 'Haiti: The Elite's Revenge', *NACLA Report on the Americas* 25:3 (December 1991), p. 6.

44 Rousseau, 'Discourse on Political Economy', p. 66; *Social Contract*, pp. 2:3; 1:7 (translation modified).

45 Saint-Just, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 547.

46 See Marx and Engels, 'Les Conspireurs', par A. Chenu' (1850), in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 10, p. 318; Marx, 'Meeting of the Central Authority, September 15, 1850', in *Collected Works of Marx and Engels*, vol. 10, pp. 625-9; Engels, 'Introduction', in Marx, *Civil War in France*, p. 14.

tegic differences, Lenin is no more tempted than Luxemburg to substitute a Blanquist conspiracy for 'the people's struggle for power', via mobilization of the 'vast masses of the proletariat'.⁴⁷ It's not a matter of imposing an external will or awareness upon an inert people, but of people working to clarify, concentrate and organize their own will. Fanon makes much the same point, when he equates a national liberation movement with the inclusive and deliberate work of 'the whole of the people'.⁴⁸

3. The will of the people is thus a matter of material power and active empowerment, before it is a matter of representation, authority or legitimacy. What divides society is its response to popular self-empowerment. This is as much a Marxist as it is a Jacobin insight. Any social 'transformation can only come about as the product of the – free – action of the proletariat', notes Lukács, and 'only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possesses this ability to transform things'. Such a praxis-oriented philosophy did not die out after the political setbacks of the 1920s. Sartre took up the same theme in the early 1950s (before Badiou in the 1970s): as far as politics is concerned, a 'class is never separable from the concrete will which animates it nor from the ends it pursues. The proletariat forms itself by its day-to-day action. It exists only by action. It *is* action. If it ceases to act, it decomposes'.⁴⁹

Will commands the initiation of action, not representation. An exercise in political will involves taking power, not receiving it, on the assumption that (as a matter of 'reason' or 'natural right') the people are always already entitled to take it. 'The oppressed cannot enter the struggle as objects,' Freire notes, 'in order *later* to become human beings'.⁵⁰ It makes no sense, as John Brown argued during his trial in 1859, to treat the imperatives of justice merely as recommendations that must bide their time: 'I am yet too young', Brown said on the eve of his execution, 'to understand that God is any respecter of persons'.⁵¹ A similar impatience

47 V. I. Lenin, 'The Conference Summed Up' (7 May 1906); cf. Hal Draper, 'The Myth of Lenin's "Concept of The Party"' (1990); both available at www.marxists.org.

48 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1968), pp. 155-6.

49 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 205; Sartre, *The Communists and Peace*, trans. Martha Fletcher (New York: Braziller, 1968), p. 89.

50 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Ramos (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 50.

51 Cited in Arthur Jordan, 'John Brown's Raid on Harper's Ferry', *International Socialist Review* 21:1 (1960); available at www.marxists.org. 'The general will, to be truly so, must be general in its object as well as in its essence; it must come from all to be applied to all' (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, p. 2:4).

informs the strategic voluntarism of Che Guevara, who knew that it is pointless to wait 'with folded arms' for objective conditions to mature. Whoever waits for 'power to fall into the people's hands like a ripe fruit' will never stop waiting.⁵²

As one of today's more eloquent proponents of a 'living communism' suggests, an inclusive popular politics must start with an unconditional assertion of the 'humanity of every human being'. Our politics, says S'bu Zikode, chairperson of the Durban shack-dwellers' movement Abahlali baseMjondolo, is rooted in the 'places that we have taken' and kept:

We will no longer quietly wait for our humanity to be finally recognized one day. We have already taken our place on the land in the cities and we have held that ground. We have also decided to take our place in all [political] discussions and to take it right now. We take our place humbly, but firmly. We do not allow the state to keep us quiet in the name of a future revolution that does not come. We do not allow the NGOs to keep us quiet in the name of a future socialism that they can't build. We take our place as people who count the same as everyone else.⁵³

Those who lack confidence in the people, by contrast, recommend the virtues of patience. It is always too early, from this perspective, for equality and participation. Only when they 'grow up' or 'progress' might today's people become worthy of the rights that a prudent society will withhold – forever. Between confidence in the people and confidence in historical progress, as Rousseau anticipated, there is a stark choice.

4. Like any form of free or voluntary action, the will of the people is grounded in the practical sufficiency of its exercise. Will is no more a 'substance' or object of knowledge than the *cogito* variously reworked and affirmed by Kant, Fichte and Sartre. A 'fundamental freedom' or 'practical exercise of reason' proves itself through what it does and makes, rather than through what it is, has or knows. Freedom demonstrates and justifies itself through willing and acting, or else not at all. We *are* free, writes Beauvoir, but freedom 'is only by making itself be'. We are free in

52 Che Guevara, 'The Marxist-Leninist Party', in *Che: Selected Works of Ernesto Guevara*, eds Rolando E. Bonachea and Nelson P. Valdés (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1969), pp. 104–6.

53 S'bu Zikode, 'The Burning Issue of Land and Housing', 28 August 2008; available at www.diakonia.org.za.

so far as 'we will ourselves free',⁵⁴ and we will ourselves free by crossing the threshold that separates passivity and 'minority' from volition and activity. We will ourselves free across the distance that our freedom puts between itself and a previous unfreedom. We are free as self-freeing.

5. If it is to persist, a political association must be disciplined and 'indivisible' as a matter of course.⁵⁵ Internal difference and debate within an organized association is one thing; factional divisions or schisms are another. Popular freedom persists as long as the people assert it. 'In order that the social pact may not be an empty formula,' as Rousseau's notorious argument runs, 'it tacitly includes the commitment, which alone can give force to the others, that anyone who refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the entire body; this means nothing else than that he will be forced to be free.' Preservation of public freedom, in Robespierre's arresting phrase, requires acknowledgement of the 'despotism of truth'. Collective freedom will endure, in short, only so long as the people can defend themselves against division and deception.⁵⁶

'Virtue' is the name that Rousseau and the Jacobins gave to the practices required to defend a general will against deception and division. Virtue in this generic sense need not take the form of an exclusive patriotism. To practise virtue is simply to privilege collective over particular interests, and to ensure that society is governed 'solely on the basis of the common interest . . . Each person is virtuous when his private will conforms totally to the general will.' If then 'we wish the general will to be accomplished' we only need to encourage 'all the private wills to agree with it, or in other words . . . make virtue reign'.⁵⁷

6. The practical exercise of will only proceeds, as a matter of course, in the face of resistance. To will is always to continue to will, in the face of difficulty or constraint. To continue or not to continue – this is the essential choice at stake in any militant ethics.⁵⁸ Either you will and do something, or you do not. Even as it discovers the variety of ways of doing

54 Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), pp. 24–5, 130–1.

55 'For the same reason that sovereignty is inalienable, it is indivisible, for the will is general, or it is not' (Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 2:2; cf. Robespierre, *Œuvres*, vol. 7, p. 268).

56 Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 1:7; Robespierre, *Œuvres*, vol. 9, pp. 83–4.

57 Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 2.1; 'Discourse on Political Economy', pp. 69, 67, translation modified.

58 Cf. Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 27–8; Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 52, 91.

or not-doing, these are the alternatives a political will must confront: yes or no, for or against, continue or stop, where 'to stop before the end is to perish'.⁵⁹

If for the Jacobins of 1793 'terror' comes to figure as the complement to 'virtue', it is above all as a consequence of their determination to overcome the resistance of the privileged and their political protectors. Terror in the Jacobin (as opposed to Thermidorian) sense is the deployment of whatever force is required to overcome those particular interests that seek to undermine or disempower the collective interest. The reason why the Jacobin terror continues to terrify our political establishment, in a way that the far more bloody repression of the 1871 Commune does not, has little to do with the actual amount of violence involved. From the perspective of what is already established, notes Saint-Just, 'that which produces the general good is always terrible'. The Jacobin terror was more defensive than aggressive, more a matter of restraining than of unleashing popular violence. 'Let us be terrible', Danton said, 'so that the people need not be'.⁶⁰

7. By the same token, the practical exercise of will distinguishes itself from mere wish or fantasy through its capacity to initiate a process of genuine 'realization'.⁶¹ After Fichte, Hegel complements the voluntarist trajectory initiated by Rousseau and Kant, and opens the door to Marx, when he identifies a free collective will – a will that wills and realizes its own emancipation – as the animating principle of a concrete political association. Thus conceived, the will is nothing other than 'thinking translating itself into existence . . . The activity of the will consists in cancelling and overcoming [*aufzubeheben*] the contradiction between subjectivity and objectivity and in translating its ends from their subjective determination into an objective one.'⁶² After Hegel, Marx will expand the material dimension of such concrete determination, without ever abandoning the idea that what is ultimately determinant are not given economic or historical constraints but free human action – the

59 Robespierre, *Œuvres*, vol. X, p. 572.

60 Saint-Just, 'Institutions républicaines' (1794), in *Œuvres*, p. 1141; Danton, 10 March 1793, cited in Sophie Wahnich, *La Liberté ou la mort: Essai sur la terreur et le terrorisme* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2003), p. 62.

61 Cf. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 505; Gramsci, 'The Modern Prince', in *Selections From the Prison Notebooks*, pp. 175, n. 75.

62 G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §4A, §28, translation modified.

ability of 'each single individual' to prescribe their own ends and make their own history.⁶³

8. Realization of the will of (the) people is oriented towards the universalization of its consequences. As Beauvoir understood better than Sartre, I can only will my own freedom by willing the freedom of all; the only subject that can sustain the work of unending self-emancipation is *the* people as such, humanity as a whole. Kant, Hegel and Marx take some of the steps required to move from Rousseau's parochial conception of a people to its universal affirmation, but the outcome was again anticipated by Jacobin practice: 'the country of a free people is open to all the people on earth', and the only 'legitimate sovereign of the earth is the human race . . . The interest, the will of the people, is that of humanity.'⁶⁴

9. A final consequence follows from this insistence on the primacy of political will: voluntary servitude is in some ways more damaging than external domination. If the will is 'determinant in the first instance' then the most far-reaching forms of oppression involve the collusion of the oppressed. This is the point anticipated by Étienne La Boétie, and then radicalized in different ways by Du Bois, Fanon and Aristide (and also Foucault, Deleuze and Žižek . . .): in the long run it is the people who empower their oppressors, who can harm them 'only to the extent to which they are willing to put up with them'.⁶⁵

Of course, it wouldn't be hard to write a history of the twentieth century in such a way as to illustrate the apparent futility of political will, to say nothing of the idea of communism. The failure of German communism in the 1920s, the failure of 'Soviet man' in the 1930s, the failure of anti-colonial liberation movements in the 1950s and '60s, the failure of Maoism, the failure of 1968, the failure of anti-war and anti-globalization protests – all these seeming failures might seem to demonstrate one and the same basic point: the diffuse, systemic and hence insurmountable nature of contemporary capitalism, and of the forms of state and disciplinary power which accompany it.

63 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), p. 55; cf. Marx, *Capital*, I, p. 739.

64 Saint-Just, *Œuvres*, p. 551; Robespierre, *Œuvres*, vol. 9, p. 469; vol. 7, p. 268.

65 Étienne La Boétie, *The Discourse of Voluntary Servitude*, trans. Harry Kurz (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942); available at www.constitution.org; translation modified.

Such a distorted history, in my opinion, would amount to little more than a rationalization of the defeats suffered in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Ever since the revolutionary upheavals in late eighteenth-century France and Haiti, the history of the modern world has been shaped above all by the determination of our ruling classes to pacify the people they rule. As Michel Foucault demonstrated in convincing detail, a wide range of counter-revolutionary strategies for criminalizing, dividing and then dissolving the will of the people – for restoring the people to their ‘normal’ condition as a dispersed and passive flock – were hastily developed during and after the French Revolution; in a useful intervention Naomi Klein has recently shown how, in the last couple of decades, similar strategies have been deployed at new levels of intensity and ferocity.⁶⁶ The result, so far, has been the preservation of popular passivity and deference on a confounding scale.

In the late 1940s Beauvoir already bemoaned our tendency to ‘think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it’.⁶⁷ By the late 1970s such complaint, revalorized as celebration, had become the stuff of a growing consensus. This consensus has now been dominant, in both politics and philosophy, for more than thirty disastrous years. It’s time to leave it behind.

⁶⁶ Cf. Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2006). In her *Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), drawing on the paradigm illustrated by Ewen Cameron’s notorious psychiatric experiments at the McGill University in the 1950s, Naomi Klein shows how ‘disaster capitalists’ systematically make use of natural disasters, military assault and psychological warfare in order to ‘soften up’ popular resistance to newly intense forms of exploitation or oppression. ‘Shock’ serves to isolate and disorientate people, paralysing their will and capacity to defend their own most essential interests.

⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 139.

8 The Common in Communism

Michael Hardt

The economic and financial crisis that exploded in Fall 2008 resulted in an extraordinarily rapid sea-change in the realm of political imaginaries. Just as a few years ago talk of climate change was ridiculed and dismissed in the mainstream media as exaggerated and apocalyptic, but then almost from one day to the next the fact of climate change became the nearly universal common sense, so too the economic and financial crisis has rearranged the dominant views of capitalism and socialism. Until very recently, any critique of neo-liberal strategies of deregulation, privatization and the reduction of welfare structures – let alone of capital itself – was cast in the dominant media as crazy talk. Today, *Newsweek* proclaims on its cover, with only partial irony, ‘We are all socialists now.’ The rule of capital is suddenly open to question, from Left and Right, and some form of socialist or Keynesian state regulation and management seems inevitable.

We need to look, however, outside this alternative. Too often it appears as though our only choices are capitalism or socialism, the rule of private property or that of public property, such that the only cure for the ills of state control is to privatize and for the ills of capital to publicize, that is, exert state regulation. We need to explore another possibility: neither the private property of capitalism nor the public property of socialism but the common in communism.

Many central concepts of our political vocabulary, including communism as well as democracy and freedom, have been so corrupted that they are almost unusable. In standard usage, in fact, communism has come to mean its opposite, that is, total state control of economic and social life. We could abandon these terms and invent new ones, of course, but we would leave behind too the long history of struggles, dreams and aspirations that are tied to them. I think it is better to fight over the concepts themselves in order to restore or renew their meaning. In the case of communism, this requires an analysis of the forms of political organization that are possible