

THE IDEA OF COMMUNISM 2

THE NEW YORK CONFERENCE



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'What are we to do in such times? The first thing to demonstrate is that the subterranean work of dissatisfaction is continuing: rage is accumulating and a new wave of revolts will follow. So it is important to set the record straight, to locate these events in the totality of global capitalism, which means showing how they relate to its central antagonism.'

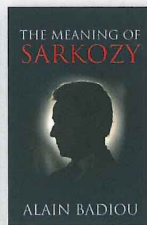
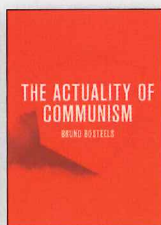
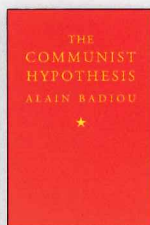
Slavoj Žižek

The first volume of *The Idea of Communism* followed the 2009 London conference called in response to Alain Badiou's 'communist hypothesis', where an all-star cast of radical intellectuals put the idea of communism back on the map.

This volume brings together papers from the subsequent 2011 New York conference organized by Verso and continues this critical discussion, highlighting the philosophical and political importance of the communist idea, in a world of financial and social turmoil.

Slavoj Žižek is a Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic. His books include *Less Than Nothing; Living in the End Times; First as Tragedy, Then as Farce; In Defense of Lost Causes*; six volumes of the *Essential Žižek*, and many more.

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2 Communism as Commitment, Imagination, and Politics

Etienne Balibar

The first thing that I want to do is thank the organizers of the conference for their invitation. And in particular I want to express my deep gratitude to Alain Badiou: not only because he could not join us in person in this conference that he had entirely planned in close spiritual community with Slavoj Žižek, and is now experiencing hardship, but because it is entirely due to his repeated and personal insistence that I find myself tonight in your company. Alain and I are very old friends, going back almost to when I met him for the first time, although in those early years I was too impressed by his precocious philosophical mastery, and the age difference formed an unbreakable barrier, however small it may appear fifty years later. Soon after that he decided on a completely spontaneous and generous move to join the small group of young philosophers gathered around Althusser, and immediately brought to us a new impulse while displaying absolute egalitarianism. None of us could ever forget that. Alain and I over the years have had strong disagreements, both philosophical and political, leading sometimes to quite harsh exchanges (it was again the case recently when, after I had declined in somewhat aggressive terms his proposal to join the conference on the Idea of Communism held in Berlin in 2010, he wrote to me that I had managed never to find myself where 'things are really happening', after which each of us felt obliged to explain to the other why what he thought was not worth much). But we have succeeded in remaining faithful to one another; I have the fondest memory of his signals of solidarity and gestures of esteem, and I have found myself intellectually rewarded each time I have had to engage with his ideas or his arguments. I am sad that he is not here tonight, but I will try to act as if he were, and address him as if he could react or even respond.

The title that I had proposed with only a vague idea of how I would treat it in detail – 'Communism as Commitment, Imagination, and Politics' – has led me to build an argument in which I confront my own reflections

with propositions from some of our contemporaries, indeed protagonists of the debate on the 'new communism', including Badiou and Žižek, which – as you could perhaps expect from a professional philosopher – follows a classical model. This is the Kantian model of the three transcendental (or perhaps only quasi-transcendental) questions, albeit in a non-classical order. The first question, corresponding to the issue of *commitment*, can be phrased like this: *Who are the communists? What are we communists hoping for?* In stronger terms, what do they/we desire? And the answer that I will propose, whose implications I will try to discuss as much as I can in such a short time span, is the following: the communists, we communists, desire to *change the world in order to become transformed ourselves*. As you notice, I use a floating designator for the subject of the proposition, this ambiguity being part of the problem which needs to be discussed. And I make use of formulae belonging to a well-known Marxian tradition, partially coinciding with our 'idea of communism', albeit somewhat modified. These two formal characteristics will reappear in the next questions. The second question, corresponding to the issue of *imagination*, is the following: *What are the/we communists thinking of?* – or, more precisely, what are they/we *thinking in advance*, in the sense of 'anticipations of the understanding'? And the answer is: they/we are *diversely interpreting the real movement which overcomes* ('aufhebt') *capitalism* and the capitalist society based on commodity production and exchange, or 'modelled' on this production and exchange. In other terms, they/we are *diversely interpreting effective history in the making*. Finally, the third quasi-transcendental question is the following: *What are they/we doing*, or better said – to retrieve diverse translations of the term *conatus* used by classical philosophers – *what are they/we endeavouring to do, striving at, fighting for?* And the answer could be, I will suggest: they/we are participating in various 'struggles' of emancipation, transformation, reform, revolution, civilization; but in doing that we are not so much 'organizing' as 'de-organizing' these struggles.

And now, without further ado, let us examine the first question, the question of communist commitment. The reason why I ask it in this form, related to hopes, desires (perhaps dreams), is that I want to explain right away in which sense I consider that a central proposition belonging to what Alain Badiou calls the 'communist hypothesis' is indisputable: namely, the primacy of the relationship between *idea* and *subjectivity*, and as a consequence the intrinsically 'idealistic' character of the communist discourse, however distorted or disavowed it becomes when it presents

itself as a 'materialist' discourse (but I suspect that, in certain conditions, 'materialism' is but one of the names of idealism), is indisputable. But I want also to explain why I believe that some of the consequences of this indisputable fact are, to say the least, problematic. However, to say that they are problematic is not to reject the premise, it is only to ask for a philosophical disquisition of the consequences.

The truth of Badiou's central formula according to which communists 'live for an idea' (or answer the call of an idea, adapt their lives to the model provided by an idea) could be purely and simply inferred from the examples we know of subjects, both individuals and collectives, whom we consider to have been communists (since *there have been communists*, this is not an entirely new race on earth), including, I repeat, those among them who, for whatever reason, good or bad, rejected the term. They were all idealists, both in the ordinary and in the technical sense of the term: dreaming of another world and ready to sacrifice much of their lives, sometimes all of it, for their conviction, as Max Weber would say. This was indeed true of Marx, one of the clearest cases of practical idealism in the history of philosophy and politics. After decades of attempts on the part of some communists (not all of them, but among them some of the most authentic) to present the pursuit of communism as a process 'without a subject', it is high time to say that a rose is a rose, and not a bicycle, and that 'communism without a subject' involves a performative contradiction. But what makes the communist a subject different from others is primarily his or her commitment to a certain idea, which is also an ideal of course. But one can add an additional argument, more speculative: by definition, the ideal object or objective of the communist desire is not something that is part of the existing state of affairs. At the very least there is a *difference*, a distance that could become an abyss, between *what there is* and *what there will be*, or could be, and it is in this gap that the subject places his/her desire. To quote here the famous definition from Marx's *German Ideology* (to which I will return) – 'communism is the real movement overcoming the existing state of affairs' – changes nothing about the situation, because subjects can either resist the movement or contribute to it, and they contribute to it only if they desire it, whatever the conditions, material or spiritual, which can facilitate or even produce this subjective orientation. So idealism is the condition for the communist commitment, or, better, it is the philosophical name of that commitment. So far, so good; but now we have to carefully examine the implications of that ideological fact, one by one and step by step, and

here perhaps we may find that the rigor of Badiou's insight, breaking with what I called the 'performative contradiction', is also accompanied by a certain blindness, or a certain refusal to envisage all the consequences. This will concern, I suggest, the place of communism in a 'world of ideas', the subjective consequences of idealistic convictions (*fidelities*, or *faithfulness*, in his terminology), or identification with the requisites and injunctions of an idea, and above all the modalities of the 'being in common' under the interpellation of that idea, which acquire a special importance in the case of the communist idea, because that idea happens to be precisely *the idea of the being in common* in its purest form. But let us be very careful about all this.

A quick word, to begin with, concerning the place of communism in the world of ideas. Communism is not the only idea, not even in the strong sense of an idea of the *non-existent which ought to exist*, after which the existing state of affairs could become different, overcome its limitations or contradictions, make life radically other, and so on, or can be represented as *becoming different*, following an anticipatory move to which I will return. And not even in the even stronger sense of an idea which possesses the ontological and epistemological character of the absolute – namely the coincidence of the mark of truth and the mark of goodness (and probably also, for that reason, the mark of beauty). I am not suggesting that there are infinitely many ideas of that kind in our intellectual world, but at least there are several, which we can try to enumerate: Justice, Liberty, Right, Love, Mankind, Nature, the Universal, Truth itself, Beauty, but also Democracy, Peace (but also War, in the form of the eternal *polemos* 'fathering everything'), the Market (as an ideal form of a universally beneficial and self-regulated system of exchanges, never realized in practice, but which can always be hoped for, and for which one can sacrifice certain interests), even the Nation (or rather the People). Even Property. It is important to notice that we receive all these ideas through signifiers, indeed master-signifiers: they place the desiring subject in a relationship of dependency with respect to this signifier, however freely chosen. There is nothing special about communism from this point of view, and this is an element that we will try to reflect on the *constitution of subjectivity* relative to ideas, inasmuch as they bear names, or pass through signifiers. What to do with this multiplicity? It might be tempting to explain (this is a certain form of simplified Platonism, with theological connotations) that all the ideas which are absolute, or eternal, as Badiou would say, are in fact identical, or form *different names* for the same absolute. But this is uninteresting

in our case because it blurs the distinctions, even the *oppositions*, which give sense to the idea of communism, and account for the *kind of subjective desire* that it raises, or the kind of imperative that it 'enunciates'. The idea of communism becomes meaningless if it means the same as the idea of Property, or the idea of the Pure Market, which are nevertheless 'ideas' in the same ontological and epistemological sense. Badiou certainly has a tendency to suggest that communism *is the only Idea* in the true sense of the term, or the Idea of ideas (like Justice, the idea of the Good, in the philosophy of Plato), and conversely that *Idea* – or, for this purpose, rather, 'ideal' – and *communism* are synonymous terms. And as a consequence all the other ideas are either other names, perhaps partial names, for communism (such as Equality, or Justice, or the Universal) or *simulacra* of the communist idea (such as the Market) – the case of the idea of Democracy remains dubious . . . This could be a form of philosophical naivety, an expression of his personal commitment to communism, the passion that inhabits his own desire, and so on. But I believe there is a stronger reason, which is that Badiou does not want to expose the characteristics of communism from outside, in a distanced or even relativistic manner, but from the inside, as a phenomenological elucidation of its intrinsic manifestation, or revelation. The idea reveals its true character only to the subject who desires its realization, and it is in this character that the 'communist subject' is interested. However, the problem will now become that it is impossible to analyze and to compare what differentiates a communist commitment from other commitments, which also can be rational or mystic, civilized or fanatic, and so on.

Let us suspend for a minute this comparison, and return to the *specificity* of the communist idea. I believe that we can express it by saying that what (we) the communists desire is *to change the world* (as Marx famously wrote, albeit that he did not invent this idea, which is typically post-Kantian, and also has precedents in the gnostic tradition). But, more precisely, they want to change the world – meaning, at least in a first approximation, the social and historical world, the 'ensemble of social relations' – *radically*, whereby (I keep following certain Marxian formulations) *humans themselves will be changed* (or a 'new man' will emerge, inasmuch as 'man' is nothing other than the immanent result of its own conditions or relations). Or *the life of the humans*, i.e. *our own life*, will be changed. It is important to underline this *telos*, implied in the combination of the two 'changes', because from the communist point of view, to change the world is uninteresting if it does not lead ultimately to a new form of life in which

the human qua *relational 'essence'* becomes different, reversing the characteristics of life under capitalism (particularly unlimited competition, therefore permanent ranking of individuals according to their power or their value, and in the limit cases elimination of useless or 'valueless' individuals); but changing the human involves changing the world, again if by this term we understand the social world. Now there is a causal dissymmetry in this articulation, which confers undoubtedly upon the communist idea an *eschatological* character, but there is also a retroactive, or reflexive effect, which allows it to mark the difference with a *religious eschatology*, in spite of the obvious affinities, in particular with religions centred on the perspective of *redemption* (I am not speaking of the historical legacies, but of logical analogies). I will present this retroactive effect, or reflexive dimension of the idea of communism, which is a *practical* dimension (and here, again, the idealistic determination is obvious), in the following form: although the emergence of the 'new men' (or the new human life) is possible only if the world is changed, the world can be changed only if the subjects are extracting themselves, emancipating themselves from the determinations of the existing world, or at least already engaged in a process of self-emancipation. Otherwise, a redeemer of whatever kind would be needed. Accordingly the practical, albeit subjective and reflexive, dimension we are talking about is also a 'secular' one, in a fairly simple sense of the term. It corresponds to a *Verwirklichung* which is also a *Verweltlichung*. It is *this world* which changes, and it changes into *this world* – not an otherworldly realm – which is nevertheless becoming radically different; and it changes through the immanent action of its 'men', its 'subjects' (we could also say, in a different terminology, more directly political, its 'citizens'), who are already transforming themselves in order to be able to change the world. Remember again Marx (in *Statutes of the International Workingmen's Association*, 1864): 'the emancipation of the working classes will be the work of the workers themselves'. He speaks of workers, but clearly confers a universalistic dimension upon this name. Now this could seem enigmatic, or perhaps tautological, but we can give it another formulation, which is far from innocent (in particular because it partially explains *a contrario* the failure of many 'communist attempts'): the *commitment to the idea of communism* (or to the realization of the idea of communism) is a commitment that *exists only in common*. Communist 'subjects' commit themselves (*negatively*, to begin with, in the form of the elimination, the critique of their 'individualistic' self, their desire for power, domination, inequality) in order to become the *agents* of a

collective transformation of the world whose immanent result will be a change of their own lives (whether necessary or contingent, transitory or lasting, is another matter, which I leave aside here with all questions of modalities and temporalities).

We are perhaps now, in spite of the brevity of this description, which remains partly allegoric, in a position to understand better what produces at the same time the strength and the problematic character of Badiou's understanding of the consequences of the idealism that he has rightly reaffirmed. There is something strange in the fact that Badiou frequently refers to a Lacanian heritage that he would preserve, whereas in fact he almost entirely reverses the articulation of subject-position and the action of the signifier as 'cause' of the subject that is so important for Lacan (and of course, a fortiori, behind Lacan, there remains, like it or not, a Freudian legacy of the analysis of the 'community effect' of the identification of subjects to a common ideal, or 'model' [*Vorbild*] from which they derive their shared ego-ideal).¹ It is as if, for Badiou, the communist subjects, or the subjects *in the absolute*, were also 'absolute' subjects, whose subjectivation is not *caused* by the signifier that they 'recognize' as a master-signifier, but on the contrary *detached* from its conflict with the real. The heterogeneity of the symbolic and the real becomes a pure possibility of liberation. Writes Badiou: 'it is in the operation of the Idea that the individual finds the capacity to consist "as a Subject"'.² This might provide a justification for the hypothesis that the communist idea is different from any other (and therefore a commitment, an identification with the communist ideal, works on its own subjects in a manner absolutely different from any other – for example the idea of the Republic, or the idea of the Law, or the idea of the Market), albeit that there is a great probability that the justification is tautological: all the other commitments would be heteronomous – they would involve a subjection to the master-signifiers on which they depend and after which they name themselves, whereas the communist commitment would be autonomous, or, if you prefer a less Kantian terminology, it would consist in a kind of *self-interpellation* of the individual as subject. But then we need to take into account what has emerged as the singular determination of the communist idea – namely the fact that its 'imperative' is a realization of 'being in common' in order to prepare for the world

1 To enter into that, we should discuss more precisely the differences between an *idea* and an *ideal*, and their differential relationship to the 'object' of desire.

2 *The Idea of Communism*, p. 239; see also the more explicit formulation in *L'idée du communisme*, Vol. II, Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek (eds) (Paris, Editions Lignes, 2011), p. 13.

of the common good. And the difficulty becomes redoubled – on the subjective plane as on the historical plane.

It is very striking here to see that Badiou has a marked preference for an adjective that is far from innocent to characterize the kind of ‘community effect’ that belongs to communism as a militant activity, as well as an ideal to become realized in the world: the adjective *intense*, leading to the notion of *intensity*. For example, ‘We will call a site whose intensity of existence is maximal a *singularity*’.³ It is *existence* whose ‘intensity’ is maximized, but it is maximized because it proves incompatible with a separation or an isolation of the subjects themselves. And here Badiou cannot but return to the concepts (perhaps the allegories) that had served in the theological tradition to describe, precisely, an ‘intense’ participation of subjects who transcend their own individuality as they transcend every form of power relation and hierarchic subordination, to become members of the ‘glorious body’ . . . which is that of a new collective Subject in politics.⁴ And, not by chance, this is also where Badiou insists on the ‘vital importance of proper names in all revolutionary politics’⁵ and embarks on a provocative defence of the so-called ‘cult of personality’ of the charismatic leaders (Mao rather than Stalin, indeed) inasmuch as they represent an incarnated projection of the insurrectional powers of the people, and an ‘ultra-political’ function of the idea, which is to ‘create the *we*’ (we, the people; we, the revolutionaries; ultimately we, the communists). I do not say that this is either absurd or would have nothing to do with the idea of communism, in the name of what I called a moment ago its essentially ‘secular’ character (in the sense in which ‘secular’ refers to *thisworldlyness*); on the contrary. But I say that it reveals the problematic character of the notion of idealism that Badiou has a tendency to avoid discussing. The current return of the idea of communism, considered from the point of view of its consequences on the formation of a collective ‘we’ aiming at preparing the conditions of its own essential change, to a latent model of the church (even allegoric, and even or above all if it is not the model of an *institutional* church apparatus or *corpus juridicum*, but the model of what the theologians called the ‘invisible church’), has not only symbolic determinations, but also strong historical reasons. They have to do with the awareness of the consequences of another model that had governed much of the political activity of the communists in the nineteenth and twentieth

³ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis* (London, Verso, 2010), p. 215.

⁴ *The Communist Hypothesis*, pp. 244–5.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

centuries – namely the model of the *army* (with the very name ‘militants’, itself already used by the church), and more generally the model of the *state*, or the ‘counter-state’ so to speak. So, it performs a ‘purifying’ or ‘cathartic’ function. But it would be important, I believe, to recognize that it has its own ambivalent effects.

A simplified presentation of the whole story might go like this: given the fact that modern society, in other terms capitalism, has developed an *extreme form* of ‘individualism’, meaning in practice the disaffiliation of individuals and elimination of every protection against competition and solitude, but also the fact that it has ‘compensated’ for this ‘dissolution’ of solidarities and tried to ‘control’ the conflictual and violent effects of this dissolution (otherwise called ‘class struggle’ or ‘social war’) through the construction of powerful ‘imagined communities’ such as the *nation*, or even the *racial community*, the communist subjects have been engaged in the permanent quest for a form of community and community-feeling that is both *more intense* and *more disinterested* than any of these ‘imagined communities’ (‘The Proletariat is the first class in history that does not seek to impose its particular interests’, wrote Marx). The comparison with the nation is indeed the most important, both historically and analytically. Badiou’s description of the becoming collective (therefore becoming revolutionary, on a given historical ‘site’, always largely unpredictable) of the commitment to the communist idea (which certainly owes much to various authors, from Saint Paul to Sartre, but interestingly neither to Hegel nor Freud) forms a sort of *reversal* of the argument that was famously developed by Carl Schmitt: the national myth is stronger than the communist myth in distinguishing the friend from the enemy, and maximizes the intensity of the community of friends. For Badiou it is the communist ‘myth’, or *collectivizing power of the idea*, which is always already more intense, more ‘invisible’, because it is based on love rather than hate (an argument strikingly similar to the discourse of Negri, with whom otherwise Badiou is in sharp disagreement; and at this conference we have heard that they now share the reference to Saint Francis of Assisi). But I wonder if this subtracts the constitutive relationship between subject and communist idea from every pattern of identification, representation, alienation or interpellation (whatever Freud, Hegel, Lacan, or Althusser would have called it), or on the contrary calls for an additional analysis of the dialectics of *subjection and subjectivation* that exists in communism as it exists in every commitment, albeit under forms which cannot become reduced to a single pre-existing model.

I will now have to be very schematic on my second question, because I want to keep some space for the third – although in a sense it is this second question that calls for the most detailed readings and comparisons. If another occasion provides me with an opportunity to continue along the same lines, I will try to be more explicit. So I will ask your permission to offer here a description of the argument and a statement of its intentions, rather than the argument itself. I formulated the second question in the form: What are the communists (what are we communists, constituted as a ‘we’ through our common commitment to what Badiou rightly calls an idea) *thinking in advance* concerning the history in the making, of which they/we are part – a resistant part or a subversive part, we might say, always located on what Foucault (who certainly was no communist) gave the Pascalian name of a *point of heresy*? And I tentatively answered: They/we are *diversely interpreting* the movement which overcomes capitalism (not to say *speculating* about it). I could have said: They are diversely *anticipating* the modalities of the ‘crisis’ of capitalism and the possibilities opened by that ‘crisis’, whose main characteristic is precisely to be unpredictable in its outcome. I am consciously playing on the terms of Marx’s Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach, to suggest that its first part, through a sort of historical nemesis, has reacted upon the second. ‘Interpretation’ was only repressed; it returned as soon as the ‘revolutionary change’, or the *change of the change* – which is perhaps the best possible description of a revolution, namely not a continuation of the orientation and the instruments of the spontaneous change of capitalism, but a discontinuity, a reorientation towards different goals, and a reversal of the ‘means’ of dialectical transformation (as Hegel would say), passing from states and leaders to masses and ordinary ‘men without qualities’ – as soon, I repeat, as this revolutionary change displayed its intrinsic equivocity or uncertainty or conflictuality. But this is not a negative fact, a catastrophic reversal; on the contrary, it is profoundly associated with two characteristics of *communist thinking* which call for a whole epistemological elaboration.

The first is that communist thinking, reflecting on the crisis of capitalism with the perspective of ‘inserting’ collective subjects into its development, can be described as a permanent exercise in projecting the political imagination into the rational exercise of the understanding, for which I try to use the Kantian category of the *anticipation* (I am not alone in doing that). An anticipation is not a *prediction*, in the sense in which positivist ‘social science’ tries to produce predictions, either on a grand

historical scale, or within the limits of a carefully isolated model or system of methodological simplifications (most of the time implicitly governed by practical, therefore political, imperatives). It is also not a *prophetic* calling or announcement, whose characteristic is repetitive intemporality and historical indeterminacy (which, in fact, explains its irresistible power on a certain category of subjects). But it is an attempt at identifying within the present itself the limitations which are also ‘limits of possible experience’, where the reproduction of the existing structures, the continuous realization of the ongoing tendencies, or the applicability of the existing solutions to crises and contradictions, will prove impossible, and therefore call for heterogeneous actions. I find a beautiful formulation on this point by Slavoj Žižek in the volume from Berlin’s Conference last year:

a perception of historical reality not as a positive order, but as a ‘non-all’, an incomplete texture which tends towards its own future. It is this inclusion of the future into the present, its inclusion as a rupture within the order of the present, which makes the present an ontologically incomplete non-all and thus pulverises the evolutionary self-deployment of the process of historical development – in short, it is this rupture which distinguishes historicity proper from historicism.⁶

The second relevant characteristic of communist thinking is that tendencies are always accompanied by countertendencies, in thinking as in history, as Althusser was never tired of repeating – and probably the two are intrinsically linked: it is in the form of antithetic anticipations of the ongoing transformations of the present that the ‘material’ conflict of tendencies and counter-tendencies in history, or in society, becomes theoretically expressed, even if not directly or adequately. And therefore it is inasmuch as we carefully describe and discuss a pluralism of interpretations (of which we are always part ourselves) which tend to diverge rather than converge towards the same diagnoses, the same concepts, the same ‘critiques’, the same ‘utopias’, that we may have a chance to identify the play of tendencies and countertendencies, for example in the crisis of capitalism, which define our present – a present that is framed with incompleteness and non-contemporaneity. In short, there is ‘anticipation’,

⁶ *Idea of Communism*, II, p. 308. Incidentally, this formulation is not incompatible at all with much of what Negri – with whom Žižek has a fundamental philosophical disagreement, which I return to in a minute – writes on the issue of historical time; indeed both authors are continuing a line once opened by Ernst Bloch.

imagination working within the understanding, because there is neither necessity nor identity, but contingency and divergence. These are conceptual *determinations*, I insist, not impressionistic ruminations.

It has been my intention for some time now to address these issues through a confrontation of two authors who play a prominent role in contemporary debates about communism and defend strikingly opposite views of the revolution, or more generally the change, arising from opposite methodologies – namely Slavoj Žižek on one side and the twin authors Hardt and Negri on the other. One of them is here tonight, organizing this conference; the others are not, which is understandable for Antonio Negri because he is still banned from travelling to this country, but less so for Michael Hardt, whose absence, whatever its causes, I find quite regrettable. I will give a quick idea of what this confrontation should focus on in my view.

I have a formal, textual reason to set up this parallel, but I believe that it is not deprived of relevance even to the ‘strategic’ debates which concern the antagonistic relationship between capitalism and communism, because it regards their antithetic relationship to Marxism, and as a consequence to the ‘concept of history’ (or historical time, i.e. historicity) involved in Marxism. It is as if each of them had *dissociated* the elements of the Marxian conception, in particular the elements of the famous ‘topography’ (to borrow Althusser’s terminology) which allows Marx to explain the ‘dialectics’ of history and the ‘inevitable’ transformation of capitalism into communism, thus showing admittedly not that the unity of these elements was arbitrary in Marx, but that it was paradoxical, highly dependent on presuppositions that are not indefinitely tenable, and that arose from the intellectual and political conditions of a ‘moment’ which is no longer ours. It would be much too simple however to explain that, from this topography, Žižek retained only the *superstructure*, while Negri-Hardt retained the *base*. The situation is more complicated because in fact, as readers of the renowned Preface of the 1859 *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* will remember, the topography consists of not only two, but of *two times two*, or four distinct ‘instances’, between which a complex interplay becomes imagined or ‘schematized’ by Marx: the superstructure is divided into a juridical-political formalism and an ideological instance consisting of ‘forms of social consciousness’ within which the historical conflict becomes fought out (*ausfechten*), whereas the base is divided into a structure of ‘relationships of production’ which are essentially forms of property, and an autonomous movement of the productive forces

(*Produktivkräfte*) which, at some point, become incompatible with the existing relations of production. And it is in fact the paradoxical combination of the two ‘extreme’ instances, ideology and productive forces, which constitutes the essential movement or mobility ‘negating’ the stability, or rather the fixed order of Property and the State, in order to achieve, in a given conjuncture, a revolutionary change. This more complex pattern allows us to understand that what Žižek has essentially extracted from Marx is a dialectic of ideology (one is tempted again to write ideology) against the apparatuses of State, Property, and Law; whereas Hardt and Negri have essentially extracted a conflictual relationship between productive forces and the same system of apparatuses (which they call the ‘Republic of Property’ in their newest volume, *Commonwealth*). Of course this leads each of them to reformulate and adapt quite substantially the terms which they isolate, and in particular the ‘revolutionary’ term, *ideology* in the case of Žižek, *productive forces* in the case of Hardt and Negri, combining philosophy, history, and political analysis. And, of course, for each of them the term that has been left aside and appropriated by the other represents essentially the germ of every misunderstanding of politics and the adversary of a genuine communist mode of anticipation of the future within the present: it is ‘productive forces’, for Žižek, that would be linked with vitalism, naturalism, evolutionism, progressivism, and the admiration for the creative capacities of capitalism as an economic system; and it is ‘ideology’, for Hardt and Negri, which would be linked with voluntarism, spiritualism, decisionism, terrorism, and the nostalgia for violent interventions to ‘force’ revolutionary changes from above, using the proletarian equivalent of the bourgeois state to undo its power.

But also, at the philosophical level, this accounts for the fact that they have an antithetic relationship to the Hegelian legacy in Marx, a legacy that is maximized or even entirely recreated by Žižek, whereas it is dismissed by Hardt and Negri (continuing ancient elaborations by Negri alone) as a pure expression of the ‘modernist’ trend in Marx, which emphasizes the importance of *mediations* to transform the ‘constituent power’ of the multitude into a legal ‘constituted power’ (against which Negri advocated the ‘antimodernity’ of Machiavelli and Spinoza, now rephrased as ‘alternative modernity’). But again, let us not be too simple, because, just as in Žižek, there is no pure Hegelianism, but also a necessary intervention of a ‘sublime’ element of terror beyond or beneath the dialectic itself (which indeed owes much to an extreme interpretation of the Hegelian description of the Revolutionary ‘terror’, *das Schrecken*), and

it accounts for the fact that, at some point, the 'real' in a Lacanian sense will intrude into the ideological realm and so to speak invert its function. Similarly in Hardt and Negri there is a sort of remaining dialectical element, or in any case a continuity with the idea that conflict, more precisely class struggle, generates the very development of the productive forces and the intrinsic relationship between a 'technical composition' and a 'political composition' of labour, at least until the point where the organicity of the system of productive forces becomes autonomized, or liberated (this is the legacy of Negri's intellectual and political formation within the ranks of Italian *operaismo*, for which he duly pays tribute to the path-breaking intervention of Mario Tronti). So we are led to understand that, in this confrontation, no less than a full radiography of the philosophical and political determinations of 'revolutionary' thought is involved, which pushes us to consider the *choices* that Marx did not want to make, but also that we would not have to make without Marx and the development of contradictions in the legacy of Marx and its practical implementation. This is not to say, of course, that other figures would be irrelevant to a complete examination of this 'heretical' pattern, in the sense of displaying the points of heresy of Marxism and showing their enormous relevance. But the Žižek-Negri confrontation has the enormous interest of illustrating a radical polarity.

Now, in order to name this polarity in the most eloquent possible manner, while remaining faithful to their terminology and their discourse, I will call the imaginative anticipation of the understanding of history *à la* Žižek 'divine violence' (following in the footsteps left by the afterword of his extraordinary book, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, where he appropriates the Benjaminian terminology); and I will call the imaginative anticipation *à la* Hardt-Negri, of course, 'exodus', following the direction of the already mentioned *Commonwealth* – the third volume in the trilogy that began with *Empire* (so Exodus is exodus from the domination of Empire that takes place inside the Imperial 'territory' itself; or, to put it in Deleuzian terms, it is the *line of escape* that appears possible, or virtually present, when the power of the multitude that Empire tried to control and territorialize becomes uncontrollable). And I will summarize in the following manner what seems to me to form, each time, the *relevant question*, even the *inescapable question* that they are asking, the *philosophical difficulty* that they are handling in a disputable manner, and the *determining problem* that they are thus opening, to be retained, as much as possible, in a 'synthetic' presentation of the anticipations of the revolutionary understanding (but a

synthesis without synthesis, or one that remains 'disjunctive': being known for my eclectic capacity or temptation to occupy the mediating position, what is called in French the *juste milieu*, therefore I do my best to leave open what is, in fact, aporetic).

On the side of Žižek and 'divine violence', I believe that the absolutely correct question asked by him in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (particularly on p. 205) is the following one: 'How are we to revolutionize an order whose very principle is constant self-revolutionizing?' This is a question which is closely linked to the interpretation of the articulation between revolution and the developments of capitalism (its capacities of modernization), whereby what appears to have been the case in the last century was not the fact that revolutionary forces and class struggles represented modes of social organization *more advanced than capitalism*, but the fact that capitalism always retained or found the capacity to locate itself beyond the reach of these class struggles. But it is also linked to the interpretation of the new type of control that modern capitalism performs on subjectivities – in Freudian terms, the reversal of the function of the superego which leads not to suppressing the desire for enjoyment and affecting the murder of the father with inescapable guilt, but to locating guilt in the incapacity of the individual to liberate himself from constraints and immoderately seek the satisfaction of his demands on the market. And finally, most crucially, it is linked to the critique of *democracy* as a master-signifier used to produce voluntary servitude in our neoliberal societies, and a juridical-constitutional way to dismiss in advance, stigmatize, and expose to the brutal suppression of the global police any movement of rebellion, or transgression of the 'well-tempered' pluralistic order, that breaks with the standardized constitution of 'majorities' (often, in fact, due to the virtues of the parliamentary system combined with media distribution of information, these majorities are but oligarchic minorities).

But this is also where – in my opinion – the difficulties begin with the scenario of 'divine violence', politically and philosophically. There are at least two ways of understanding the normalizing function of democracy linked with the 'permanent revolution' of capitalism. One – which I would favour – is the idea that what currently counts as democracy is actually a process of 'de-democratization', so that there never exists anything like 'democracy' in a fixed and univocal sense, but only an endless conflict between processes of de-democratization and processes of the 'democratization of democracy', reclaiming equal rights and equal liberties for the citizens, which can take either a violent or a non-violent form, depending

on circumstances and relationships of forces but always possesses an 'insurrectional' character. This is a certain form of 'negativity', but it is not the one that Žižek prefers, because it lacks the 'decisionist' (therefore in fact *sovereign*) element involved in the notions of 'divine violence', and a passage from the simple transgression of the law, or resistance to the oppressive order, into a 'terror' which he essentially defines in terms of the collective absence of fear of the consequences of an uncompromising *wager* on the possibility of equality and justice (therefore absence of the fear of death, both given and received: this is, incidentally, one of the important differences between Žižek and Badiou, the necessity or not of confronting death in the implementation of the communist idea, therefore also the existence of the death drive).

This is where, as we know, Žižek not only privileges the Leninist interpretation of Marxism – even the idea that revolution must be possible where its 'social' conditions of possibility are not given, because it *creates* retrospectively its own conditions or prerequisites in the course of its achievement, and in fact always represents a decision to try the 'impossible', whose consequences are unknown, and probably fearful – but also returns from the Leninist concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat to its model or *Urbild* in the Jacobin terror, whose essential motto in his eyes is Robespierre's inverted tautology: 'Citizens, did you want a revolution without a revolution?' Although Žižek brilliantly manages to find a correspondence between this formula and the Hegelian notion of a 'revolution that includes within itself a reformation', or rather precisely because of this brilliant (*too brilliant*, in fact) demonstration, I believe that we face here a profound dilemma concerning the philosophical scheme of the 'negation of the negation' which affects every use that we can make of revolutionary schemes when we try to apply them to oppose the conservative functions of democracy as a system of the disciplining of the exploited classes and the processes of de-democratization within the democratic form of the state. A 'revolution *not without revolution*' does not simply name the reiteration of the democratic idea; it names an *excess*, a decision, or even better – as Bruno Bosteels rightly suggests in his excellent discussion of Žižek (in *The Actuality of Communism*) – an *act* without which revolution returns to reform, and reform to reiteration of the status quo. So it is the perilous excess without which there is no difference between reformation and reform, and the internal, subjective reformation of the revolutionaries would become indiscernible from a subjection imposed from above. But it is also, for the same reason, a leap outside the dialectic

of the institutions, or a sublime intrusion of the real into the symbolic, whereby, as Hegel perfectly knew and explained in the *Phenomenology*, the revolutionaries become subjectively unable to distinguish a destruction of the old order from their own self-destruction, inasmuch as they are themselves products and exemplars of the old order. This is the problem of the quality of the negation, the 'real negation', if I may say so (or the effective negativity), that Žižek profoundly works through, on the tracks of a re-Hegelianized Marxism; but it is also an extremist reading of Hegel that we can consider his contribution to the aporetic problem of the anticipations of communism, fully accepting his starting point in the critique of the inability of progressivist Marxism to cope with the transformative capacities of capitalism, but acknowledging that the distinction between an *internal* and an *external* negation, a *determinate* and *indeterminate* negativity, is extremely hard to find in history and open to unexpected returns of the death drive . . .

Let me now say something similar about Hardt and Negri. As I suggested briefly a moment ago, I take the *operaista* legacy to remain very important in their thinking; but this leads to another kind of difficulty, located in the immediate vicinity of what is probably their most interesting contribution to post-Marxist thought – namely their reformulation of the concept of the *productive forces* in 'biopolitical' terms, involving what they call a 'confusion' of the traditionally distinct processes of 'production' and 'reproduction' (in the sense of reproduction of the 'living capital', itself made of 'living individuals' who enter the labour process as producers under the control of capital). Finally it leads to the transformation of the category 'labour' as it was identified by industrial capitalism (all the way along from the industrial revolution to the transformations implemented by Fordism and welfare capitalism under the impact of workers' struggles inside and outside the factory, but also under the imaginary threat of the Bolshevik revolution, rightly identified by Negri in a brilliant essay from the 1970s as a decisive cause of the Keynesian reform), a more general, more diverse category of 'activity' that merges manual labour with intellectual labour, and combines the rational, utilitarian dimensions of exploitation with the 'affective' dimension of the reproduction of the labour force, which, in an ironic manner (since in other places they enthusiastically endorse a *queering* of the category of 'gender' amounting to a relativization of the distinctions inherited from the bourgeois family between the feminine and the masculine roles and identities), they do not hesitate to call a

'feminization of labour' – a feminization which is also a sort of naturalistic de-naturation . . .

As we know, many things here are at the same time highly interesting and also highly disputable, especially for Marxists, in terms of both conceptual schematism and the interpretation of historical tendencies. The discussion of the category 'labour' is especially fruitful because, while it remains faithful to the idea that labour is centrally a political category as much as an economic one, or the discussion of revolutionary politics (which they also call 'insurrections' in the broad sense), it must remain directly rooted in the activity of the 'producers', if not necessarily identified with a historical figure of the *worker* (*der Arbeiter*), at least with a discussion of *what happens in*, and, so to speak, *to* the production process. It also suggests that the transformation of the category 'labour' into a multilateral activity of the individual – in fact only thinkable as a *trans-individual* activity, always already requiring the *various forms of cooperation* between individuals – which for Marx (for example, in famous passages of *The German Ideology*) formed the horizon of the 'communist' transformation of the productive forces when they have 'reached the stage of forming a totality' at the global level, is now considered a *fait accompli* under capitalism itself. Most readers of Negri and Hardt, except their enthusiastic supporters, resist this idea, but I believe that it deserves a careful discussion. There is a subtle, in fact conflictual relationship to the *utopian* element in Marx involved here. On the one hand Hardt and Negri tend to criticize an analysis of the tensions between a *narrow*, utilitarian institution of wage labour dominated by the imperatives of capitalist accumulation, and a wider notion of *activity* involving its multiple anthropological dimensions (manual and intellectual, rational and affective), that would postpone it into the future, in the name of the critique of alienation. Instead, they want to project the utopia into the present, and make it the permanent horizon of our understanding of contemporary capitalism. The great leap forward is accomplished when, as Marx explained – in *Capital* – the process of production was not only a production of goods, commodities, and new means of production, but also a *reproduction* (even an *enlarged reproduction*) of the capitalist social relations themselves. They now explain that the reproduction, in its most immediate and vital aspects, has become so profoundly integrated into the production process that it explodes the control of the existing forms of property, regulation and disciplinary power, and gives rise, at least potentially – of course this 'potentiality' is the whole question – to an *autonomy* or an 'exodus' of the

living forces and their cooperation from the command of capital. Are we not here in the most blatant form of wishful thinking, in the name of historical materialism? In any case, we are certainly in a typical form of 'progressivism', in particular because Hardt and Negri have an avowed tendency to generalize what they present as the most 'advanced' and also 'subversive' forms of activity within contemporary capitalism, which shake the old territorialities and the old forms of the division of labour, as the already present image of the future that is awaiting every productive activity, especially in relation to the intellectualization and the feminization of labour.

My own critique of Hardt and Negri's grand narrative would focus on the following aspects of their argument, but also, for the same reasons, emphasize a *question* that, with their help, and qua communist subjects who are also thinking subjects, we cannot *not ask*, *not keep in mind* what we anticipate. First, I would say that they have a tendency to *ignore the counter-tendencies* in the developments that they describe (or imagine), therefore enhancing an evolutionist view of the development and transformations of capitalism. This is particularly true for their description of the intellectualization of labour, famously started long ago by Negri through his emphasis on the single page where Marx used the term 'general intellect' (in English), which plays a crucial role in their argument that the *law of value* linked to capitalist exploitation is transformed, because the profits of capital (or, as they prefer to say, the new *rent* extracted by capital) essentially derive from a cooperation among the producers, mediated by processes of communication and intellectual innovation whose result is not measurable: this would be the emergence of the 'new commons', which in turn anticipate (or already engage) a *new communism* (they fully endorse and extrapolate the theory and the practice of the 'creative commons'). But they ignore or minimize the counter-tendency – namely the gigantic forms of standardization, mechanization, and intensification of 'intellectual labour', especially in the fields of information technology, which through the use of iron discipline and savage constraints on a precarious workforce (corroborated in the new intensity of physical suffering in its computerized activities) forces cooperation to return under the law of value, and so to speak remakes 'physical labour' out of 'intellectual labour' (the category of biopolitics is misleading here, it seems to me). Similarly, on the side of the feminization of labour and the integration of the affective dimension of the reproduction of the living forces of production into the productive process itself, they ignore the

counter-tendency which has been widely emphasized by recent debates on the uses of the newly fashionable category of the *care* to recreate forms of slavery, especially targeting the feminine workforce from the Global South (through the generalization of semi-controlled, criminalized migrations), but also the good old housewives and social workers of our 'developed' countries. Or perhaps *they do not ignore these counter-tendencies?* In that case they should develop their thinking concerning the *conflictual dimension* that, more than ever, affects the tensions between exploited labour and human activity in general, including its contradictory relationship with forms of coerced and autonomous cooperation, and they could thus contribute to a discussion of the extent to which 'real subsumption' of every aspect of the human life under the command of capital is in fact impossible, or *reaches a limit* within capitalism itself, which makes it impossible to create a 'pure' capitalism, or an 'absolute capitalism', even in the age of neoliberalism. Thus the outcome of capitalist development must remain suspended and uncertain. But this is in a sense a reverse reading of their notion of 'exodus'.

Second, I would say that the enormous interest of Hardt and Negri's discussion of the 'biopolitical' dimension of the transformations of labour and activity also lies in the fact of its imposing a fresh consideration of the relationship between Marxism and the issue of *anthropological differences* (of which the manual and the intellectual, the rational and the affective, but above all the sexual differences and the differences of gender-roles are typical examples). Again, they are perhaps suggesting a question that they too quickly resolve, or whose resolution in their terms is not the only possible one. This is because a notion of 'biopolitical reason' and the 'productivity of bodies' allows for the introduction into the 'political composition' of the multitude of all the differences without which there is no representation of the human, but which also can never become simply and forever encapsulated into administrative, sociological and psychological categories, beyond the simple model of the organization of industrial and commercial labour. But it also tends, paradoxically, to *homogenize* the multiplicity or diversity of social relations, subjective positions, conflicts between dominations and resistances, which it tries to articulate. I would suggest that the *order of multiplicity* that is involved in the consideration of all these anthropological differences (to which we should add others: ethnic and cultural differences, normality and abnormality, adulthood and childhood, and so on) is in fact greater than such concepts as 'productive forces' or

'biopolitics' allow us to think. This is not to say that, each time, a problematic of the 'common' or 'commonality' is not involved, especially in the form of collective struggles against the use of differences to isolate and oppose individuals, and attempts at basing solidarities on relations and interdependencies. But there is nothing that guarantees that these *diverse types of difference* will contribute to the same, or to a single, total idea of communism – or only in the most abstract form (for example, claiming equality), however important it is politically. Once again, this is a problem that we may want to inscribe in the aporetic column of communist thinking, as a diverse interpretation of the transformation of the world, rather than a universally agreed element of the history that 'we' are making. But, again, as in the case of Žižek, there would be no way to ascertain the diversity of the interpretations and ask about the real contradiction that they reveal if nobody had actually taken the risk of boldly choosing one of the branches of a conceptual antinomy.

I realize now that I have exhausted my time, so I will not actually present my third point in detail. I will only indicate, in the most telegraphic manner, which aspects I would try to articulate (and I will do it more effectively as soon as there is time, space, or another opportunity for that).

I would start with the simple consideration that we can know only *after the event* what the 'communists' do – how they act, which struggles they endorse, which concrete causes they fight for – when they are confronted not only with their own desire, but with existing social conditions and already given political alternatives, which is always the case in practice. However, at the same time (and this is part of both the subjective logic of commitment and the intellectual structure of anticipation), they can never, by definition, observe a quietist attitude or a position of 'wait and see'. What they need to do is find an angle, or a viewpoint, from which the contradictions of emancipatory, transformative – and, I would add, also civilizing – political movements, for example against forms of extreme social and political cruelty, can become radicalized and, as Badiou would say, intensified. From this point of view, the final page of Marx's *Communist Manifesto* is extraordinarily interesting and revealing, because it simultaneously affirms two things that are in fact interdependent and remain, in my opinion, completely actual (or perhaps have become actual again). One is that the communists do not form a *special party*; or the 'party' that they form is nothing else than the 'general interest' and the 'general movement' of the existing parties (perhaps we could say, in generic terms,

organizations) pursuing emancipatory objectives and seeking to transform the world. The second is that the convergence of this 'general movement' is guaranteed in Marx by the fact that the 'proletarians', a paradoxical 'class' as we know, different from any other social class (in fact it is a non-class according to the terms that define social classes in past and present societies), combine a rejection of *private property* with a rejection of nationalist prejudices, or let's simply say *the national idea*. This is what allows Marx to declare, in a manner at the same time historical and prophetic, that the communists and the proletarians, 'uniting' at the level of the whole world, are but two names for the same collective subject, at least *in potential*. As I have argued on a previous occasion,⁷ we have lost this conviction. But we did not lose the awareness, even the acute awareness, of the importance of the problem. The tentative conclusion I draw from this is a radicalization of the idea that the communists 'do not form a specific party'. I give it the form, intentionally provocative: the communists as such are certainly participating in organizations, and in the organization of movements, campaigns, or struggles, because there is no effective politics without organizations, however diverse their figure can and must be, depending on the concrete objectives. But they are not building any organization of their own, not even an 'invisible' one – they are, rather, *de-organizing the existing organizations*, the very organizations in which they participate: not in the sense of undermining them from the inside, or betraying their friends and comrades in the middle of the battles, but in the sense of questioning the validity of the distances and incompatibilities (very real, most of the time) between different types of struggles and movements. In that sense they essentially perform a 'negative' function in the form of a very positive commitment.

For that function, I was always tempted to borrow, once again, and as others already have done here, the famous name of the 'Vanishing Mediator' invented by our friend Fredric Jameson in his extraordinary essay comparing the function of the Jacobins in Marx's theory of the constitution of the bourgeois state, and the function of Calvinist Protestantism in the transition towards modern entrepreneurial capitalism as seen by Max Weber.⁸ This was because a 'mediator' can be interpreted as a figure of temporality or historicity, but also as a figure of spatiality, translation, and heterotopy: a Vanishing Mediator is a vanish-

⁷ See 'Occasional Notes on Communism', available at krisis.eu.

⁸ See Fredric Jameson, 'The Vanishing Mediator, or Max Weber as Storyteller', in *The Ideologies of Theory*, vol. 2, Routledge 1988, 3–34.

ing traveller across borders that can be geographic, but also cultural and political; he can be a translator between incompatible idioms and organizational logics – and in order to do that he may have to *change name*, which is an important idea to discuss with respect to 'communist politics' today, and its being located sometimes, perhaps most of the time, where we do not see it. However, without losing the benefits of this crucial allegory, another reference comes to my mind, with which I want to conclude provisionally, and which has affinities with the allegory of the Vanishing Mediator although, in a sense, it reflects a different logic. This is Althusser's idea, repeated several times, that 'philosophers' (but in fact he was thinking of 'communist philosophers', and I submit that we can readily extend this consideration to 'communists' in general) are those who 'disappear in their own intervention' (vanish, if you like). This is what, according to him, demonstrates as much as possible that this intervention was *effective*. This is, of course, a very different idea from the one proposed by Badiou that communists display their fidelity to an idea whose consequences they enact: not so much perhaps because the practice, in the end, would be different – this is of course, as always in politics, a matter of the circumstances, the conditions and the forces – but because the philosophical reference is antithetic: not Saint Paul or Plato, but Spinoza, and possibly Machiavelli. I am not asking you to choose, I am just suggesting, once again, that we reflect on the diversity of the interpretations.