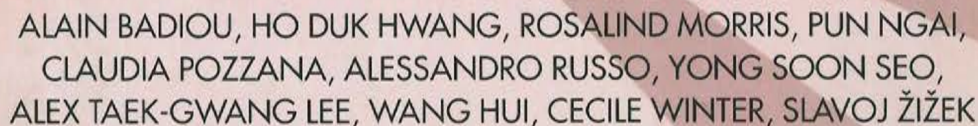
THE IDEA OF COMMUNISM 3

THE SEOUL CONFERENCE

EDITED BY ALEX TAEK-GWANG LEE AND SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK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In 2009 Slavoj Žižek brought together an acclaimed group of intellectuals to discuss the continued relevance of communism. Unexpectedly the conference attracted an audience of over 1,000 people.

The discussion has continued across the world and this book gathers responses from the conference in Seoul. It includes the interventions of regular contributors Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, as well as work from across Asia, notably from Chinese scholar Wang Hui, offering regional perspectives on communism in an era of global economic crisis and political upheaval.

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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*; four volumes of the Essential Žižek, and many more.

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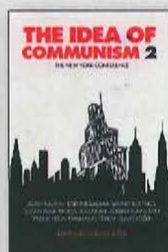

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10 Unpopular Politics: The Collective, the Communist and the Popular in Recent Thai History

Rosalind C. Morris

> *They call it a* 'democratic coup d'état' *see. You have to have a lot of* coups d'état. *Otherwise it isn't democracy.*
>
> Khamsing Srinawk, *The Politician*

When Yingluck Shinawatra was removed from prime-ministerial office in a coup in May 2014, political theorists, historians of the state in Thailand and scholars of tragedy could all imagine, if only on the basis of an antiquated formalism, that they were watching the tale of Antigone play itself out in a Siamese mode.[1] Here was a sister, apparently sacrificing herself to her brother's cause, facing off against the generals, and bearing the banner of blood on the staff of duty. The leader of a party founded by her brother, Thaksin Shinawatra (who was himself ousted from the prime minister's office in a 2006 coup), was formally charged with corruption and negligence in relation to both political appointments and a rice-subsidy programme that had transferred billions of baht to the rural periphery. Her opponents claimed that this latter policy was a mere extension of her brother's rule and, to that extent, she appears for them to be as guilty of privileging familial bonds over national interests as of any particular crime. In this sense, her error redoubles her brother's, for it was his confusion of family and economy that had led to his own conviction for corruption when, in 2006, he was found guilty of illegally transferring shares and other assets to kin and members of his household staff as a means of evading taxes.[2]

The Hegelian formula of tragedy based in the reading of Antigone famously characterizes the opposition between the state and family as a function of the contradiction between ethical life in its 'spiritual *universality*' and its 'natural' state. These forms of life ought otherwise to be in harmony, but under certain circumstances, writes Hegel, their contradictoriness is brought into active relief. The pathos of that situation, however, is not a function of the opposition but of the fact that the characters who find themselves cleaving to one or other of the ethical structures are also, and at the same time, under the sway of what they oppose, so that, together, they constitute what Hegel refers to as a totality in concrete existence. If there is an element of Antigonal tragedy in the plot of Yingluck's rise and fall (for now) from power, then, it would derive from the fact that an opposition between state and family, as ethical universality and natural ethics, has been historically produced as a dimension of political actuality in Thailand today. Under such conditions, Yingluck would be as compelled by state law as by a sense of personal duty, even if and when she acts on the basis of the latter.[3] That such an understanding dominates the political scene in Thailand today is evidenced by the fact that the ruling junta lifted the ban on her movements and granted her permission to travel to France in July 2014, on the occasion of her brother's birthday, with the calm assurance that she had confirmed her willingness to return and submit to their investigations.

While the spectre of Antigone and Hegel's return hovers uncannily

1 The essay was written in 2014 and finally revised in 2015. History does not share the tempo of book production and, inevitably, the events, persons and offices to which this essay makes reference have been followed by others. New developments and configurations of influence have emerged and others have receded. Some issues, such as the plight of the Rohingya immigtrants fleeing Myanmar had become more visible. But these were not new phenomena, except insofar as visibility constitutes a particular dimension of eventufulness. Moreover, in early 2016, there was still no House of Representatives in Thailand and government was in the hands of a body appointed by the 2014 coup group that called itself the National Council for Peace and Order. I have not attempted to revise the essay to keep up with the constant and often microscopic re-alignments of power and personal interest. What is written here remains my assessment of the scene as it appeared in 2014, and it is my belief and hope that the political logics that I observed and have attempted to analyze in these pages remains silent.

2 Rosalind C. Morris, 'Intimacy and Corruption in Thailand's Age of Transparency', in Andrew Shryock, ed., *Off Stage, On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), pp. 225–43.

3 It goes without saying that this rendition of the Antigone story is a Hegelian one, far from the more radical narrative of a sublime avowal of death that Lacan discerns in the play. For Lacan, Antigone's determination towards death, made even before Polynices' burial has been forbidden by Creon, signals her transcendence-in-transgression of the opposition between family and state, social obligation and personal will. In his analysis, she defies both norm and reason in her singular pursuit of her own (radically asocial) *jouissance*. See Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, transl. Dennis Porter (New York: Norton, 1993). There is, of course, nothing of this radicality in Yingluck Shinawatra's political self-sacrifice, but the paucity of narrative figurations with which to think what Paul Allen Miller has translated as the 'same womb-ed' in a drama pitting bureaucratic formalism against dynastic competition makes the Sophocles play seem relevant for Thailand today. All the more so because an implicitly neo-Hegelian understanding of the state underwrites the insistent sacralization of the Thai state today. See Paul Allen Miller, 'The Sublime Object and the Ethics of Interpretation', *Phoenix* 61: 1–2 (Spring 2007), p. 4.

above Thailand with the ghosts of speculative fantasies killed in the financial crises of the last two decades, it does so in the shadow of a vociferous and nearly uninterrupted insurrectionary practice. Such insurrection is testimony not to the paradigmatic opposition described by Hegel, but to a set of circumstances both unprecedented and misrecognized as mere repetitions. What the Antigone scheme hides is the place of capital in governance, and in the debate about what the state ought to be, what form it should take, and what role it should play in mediating between capital and the population at large. On the other hand, what the Thaksin/Yingluck drama reveals is that the manifold contradictions which today structure the social field can appear to be reconciled in a totality bearing the name of the people. In Thailand today, the name under which that internally differentiated totality acquires its seeming coherence vacillates between the monarch and the leader, Bhumipol Adulyadej and Thaksin Shinawatra. It is determined by the conflict between communism and populism, and by the displacement of the former by the latter. To begin to understand this situation, we will want to historicize what otherwise appears as a simple cycle of governmental destruction and restoration in popular uprisings and military coups.[4] Doing so requires an analysis of the trajectory of communism within the country, not because it is the only alternative to the contemporary impasse but because it reveals so much about the contradictions that have yet to be surpassed. It also requires an analysis of the forces and ideas that conspired to negate the communist hypothesis and the goal of radical equality. Let us then consider them.

Accusation, Contradiction, Symptom: Speaking of Thaksin

It is a remarkable fact that, today, one of the wealthiest families in the history of Thailand, a family whose capital has been accumulated across the space of only four generations, can be accused simultaneously of illegitimate accumulation and illegitimate dispensation; of playing the market and betraying the market; of monarchical, or at least king-making ambitions and communist tendencies; of authoritarianism and populism. But

4 There is a certain resemblance between this description of a recursive destruction of Thai governments and the formal continuity in resurrection that Marx once claimed was the hallmark of the Asiatic Mode of Production. I want to be clear, therefore, that the not-so-strange phenomenon of apparent crisis and perduring stability is not here attributed to any Asiatic, or Siamese, cultural principle. To the contrary, it is a function of specifically material conditions, and of the valorization of stability that has been produced, in Thailand, in the interest and under the imagistic sway of the military–monarchical alliance.

these are precisely the accusations that have been brought to bear against the Shinawatra family, and most especially the brother-and-sister team of Thaksin and Yingluck, over the last decade and a half. From the itinerant-farmer patriarch who emigrated from Guangdong in 1860 and married a Siamese woman, to his son, the investor in bus-routes and petrol stations, to his grandson, the architect of Thailand's massive silk industry, and his great-grandson, the dominant figure in its telecommunications networks, the Shinawatra family appears to incarnate the principles of an economy that has, at last, relinquished the feudal logic that underwrote the polity well into the twentieth century. With no basis in land, except as a commodity for speculation, the Shinawatra family's power stands as testimony to an historical transformation in the nature of the economy – one that pits industrial capital, agricultural capital and a residually feudal aristocracy against each other. However, the accusations against Thaksin and Yingluck are not only a product of the tension between these economic forces and forms (schematizable as such only from within the mode-of-production narrative). They are also evidence of a discontinuity and a dissonance between transformations in the economic domain, on one hand, and changes that have unevenly and with different intensities afflicted the political realm, on the other. In this sense, as Hamlet would have it, the time of Thai contemporaneity is out of joint – not with the rest of the world, but with itself.

The accusations against the Shinawatras are not all of the same order. Indeed, they can be divided into two distinct, if related, sets of contradictory claims. The first (of illegitimate accumulation and illegitimate dispensation, of playing the market and betraying the market) are organized according to economic axioms. The second (king-making ambitions and communist tendencies, authoritarianism and populism) are structured by political axioms. To a significant degree, the latter two couplets are accorded an autonomous status, with the former being read as the mere instruments and forms of appearance of the latter. This occurs every time Thaksin, Yingluck and the *Pheua Thai* ('For Thais') party are accused of vote-buying and parliamentary dictatorship – of manipulating the economy and bureaucratic procedure to secure power. However, the apparent autonomization of the political effaces the inverse process, which occurs simultaneously and on its basis – namely, the subordination of political life to economic imperatives. Only under the conditions in which economic power dictates law can someone like Thaksin be said to 'buy' the appearance of representativeness. And this is true despite the

fact that, since the 1980s, electoral office has been necessary to secure authority in areas where, previously, economic power and the threat of force could suffice.[5]

Together, the linked sequence of contradictory accusations condenses the political crisis now afflicting the Thai nation. Part of that crisis is linked to the fragile nature of the constituted authority in a nation where coups (twelve since 1932) regularly entail the suspension, invalidation and rewriting of the constitution, as well as the recurrent dissolution of the institutions of governance. Part of it derives from the ambiguous status of the monarchy, conceived as head of state in an electoral democracy (about which more will be said). And still another part derives from the more general and still unresolved conflict over state form that first began to appear at the end of the 1980s[6] – in the very moment that the communist hypothesis of radical equality was finally severed from the governmental project of the party-state.[7] By then, most of Thailand's own communists had relinquished armed struggle, returned from the jungle, and, in not inconsiderable numbers, embraced the culture concept and the idea of socially meaningful inequality in place of class contradiction as a description of Thai society.[8]

In another time, speaking in another idiom, we might have said that the current crisis consists in the blockage of crisis, in the failure to achieve the destructive precipitation of the new. For every eruption of mass protest during the past twenty-five years, there has been a corollary moment of negation and re-encompassment. The present situation is marked by a stuttering, repetitive quality, with the military defence of both capital and the monarchy providing the leitmotif of constant restabilization. Its current slogan, coined by the ruling military junta and turned into a romantic pop song, is 'return to happiness' (*kheun khwamsuk*).[9] The rhetoric of return cannot, however, conceal the fact that there has also emerged a new set of dynamics that both open onto a critical horizon and threaten to undermine it by reabsorbing egalitarian energies into populist forms.

In this chapter I am interested in how and why populism and communism can appear, from a certain perspective – namely, the perspective of contemporary financial capital in a monarchist state – to be indistinguishable in a manner that forecloses rather than refutes the division and the difference that communism would entail. That this perspective should be disputed is without question, but its vulnerability to critique does not make it any less powerful in the discursively constituted reality of the contemporary Thai world. Nonetheless, my concern here is not with the particular content of any accusation – Is Thaksin a populist? Is Yingluck? Rather, I am interested in what populism signifies, what antagonism it encodes and conceals.[10] And I

5 On the emergence of the 'electrocats' (*nak leuktang*), see Kasian Tejapira, 'Toppling Thaksin', *New Left Review* II:39 (May–June 2006), pp. 13–14.

6 Kevin Hewison, 'Of Regimes, State and Pluralities: Thai Politics Enters the 1990s', in Kevin Hewison, Richard Robison and Gary Rodan, eds, *Southeast Asia in the 1990s: Authoritarianism, Democracy and Capitalism* (Melbourne: Unwin & Allen, 1993).

7 This severance has, of course, not been performed everywhere. The possibility of a dictatorship of the proletariat, administered by a party-state, remains a powerful ambition for significant numbers of people in African states, and in some Latin American ones. There, too, one sees the recurrent devolution of communism into populism, organized around the figure of one or another leader. Achille Mbembe has read this phenomenon in the idiom of the fetish, but that concept seems most appropriate in contexts where the party-state and the ideology of representativeness are least developed. In the present situation, I am persuaded by Badiou's argument that the personality cult expresses the desire for a singular guarantee of an otherwise ungroundable claim to representation – a structure that is ubiquitously attested by the obsession with 'leadership' as a panacea for institutional failure. Achille Mbembe, 'The Aesthetics of Vulgarity', transl. Janet Roitman and Murray Last, in *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001).

8 The party's membership was always very small relative to the estimated number of sympathizers. Less than 20,000 can be counted among the party's armed forces, though more than a million people were thought to have shared its ideological project. The first defections were from the intellectuals who had joined the party following the massacre of students in 1976, and they did so on one of two bases: either the Maoist strategy of peasant insurrection was seen to be inappropriate to an increasingly industrialized economy, as Thailand's was becoming in the 1970s and '80s, or Marxism-Leninism was said to be culturally foreign to the logic of patron–clientship inscribed in so-called traditional culture. On the cultural turn and the end of communism, see Rosalind Morris, 'Populist Politics in Asian Networks: Positions for Rethinking the Question of Political Subjectivity', special twentieth anniversary issue of *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 20: 1(2012), ed. Tani Barlow. See also Kasian, 'Toppling Thaksin'.

9 See the official statement of the Thai government at: thaigov.go.th/en/program-1en/item/83780-national-council-for-peace-and-order-ncpo-program-bring-back-happiness-to-the-nation.html. The song and its accompanying music video is available on embassy websites (for example, 'Thailand in Focus: "Returning Happiness to the Thai Kingdom" song', at thaiembassy.org). It features images of a cavalcade bearing yellow flags followed by shots of the king and queen in various activities associated with the king's so-called subsistence-economy policy – planting and examining rice. Most of the video is, however, devoted to the army in various peace-keeping and emergency-service provision roles. It is doubtful that any state has ever produced a more salubrious anthem, nor one more likely to be confused with a love song. Interestingly, the edited version of the video released on Youtube focuses on ethnic inclusiveness and professional diversity, but does not include any images of the royal couple, perhaps to immunize them against appropriations that might then be vulnerable to defacement by one of the many anonymous anti-military and anti-royalist blogs operated by expatriate Thais (youtube.com/watch?v=2Yo8BOVyOqk). Inevitably, and despite these precautions, a sharp parody, with inserted frames of violent clashes and the army shooting directly into protesting crowds, is also now available online: 'Thai Army Happiness', at youtube.com/watch?v=oQZvVAZrNYI.

10 I agree with Žižek that populism is typically characterized by a gesture that reifies an existing social antagonism and gives it not only a false content but an ontological one, in the form of an enemy. I agree further that it entails an analogous reification and subordination of the governing political Idea to a nameable figure, and thereby eliminates what Adorno insisted was the essence of dialectical materialism, namely a recognition of the simultaneous difference and co-extensiveness of Concept and actuality. Having said as much, I do not believe that Stalinism or Maoism escape the accusation of a comparable reification. On the latter point alone, it seems to me, Laclau's critique of Žižek's analysis can be admitted. But I side with Žižek in believing that the danger of populist movements

am interested in what may be foreclosed but also promised under the prohibited name of communism as a result of this conflation.

But, first, a brief survey of the scene.

A Popular Scene, a Populist Triangle

On almost any given day in Thailand, one can find people protesting. In many instances, the protestors are making claims on the state for the amelioration of economic injustices. Often, this entails the demand for subsidies, or fixed commodity prices. In other instances, however, the protests are directly addressed to questions concerning the representativeness and legitimacy of the current government – though not of the state per se. Thus, yellow-shirted protestors associated with the People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD) protested against the legitimacy of Thaksin's reign in 2006 on the grounds of his corruption and market interventionism. They protested against Yingluck's regime for extending subsidies (and thus violating free-market principles), and because she was said to be the means by which Thaksin continued to exercise power despite having been banned from office (the accusation of shadow governmentality is almost always coupled with one of vote-buying). In contrapuntal opposition to the yellow-shirted protestors are the red-shirted members of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD) and their supporters, who defend the representativeness of Thaksin, Yingluck and the Pheua Thai party on the grounds of its overwhelming electoral majority, as well as the moral legitimacy of their policies aimed at the mitigation of inequality and the attenuation of rural–urban disparities in particular.

Swollen with the bodies that bear their affiliations in a reduced totemism of colour, the streets of Bangkok appear, from afar, as spectacles of a desire for the political. Protests, marches and rallies regularly interrupt the flows of traffic and the rhythms of commerce, even as they are

lies in their structurally overdetermined incapacity to provide the terms of their self-limitation. In the absence of such a principle, populism seems invariably to drive towards identitarian nationalism and the absolutization of enmity, for which Schmitt's political ontology provides the ideological rationalization. See Slavoj Žižek, 'Against the Populist Temptation', *Critical Inquiry* 32: 3 (Spring 2006); Ernesto Laclau, 'Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics Today', *Critical Inquiry* 32: 4 (Summer 2006). See also Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London/New York: Verso, 2005). On dialectical materialism, see Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973). But see, on the difficulties with this translation, Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (New York/London: Verso, 1990). Schmitt's theory of the enemy as the essence of the political appears in Carl Schimtt, *The Concept of the Political*, transl. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

absorbed into it. Food stalls and merchandize kiosks crust the periphery of the streets or the edges of parks around the protests, as vendors offer T-shirts, buttons, flags and other insignia of affiliation, as well as CDs and DVDs featuring the musicians who perform for one or other of the political assemblages.[11] Patronized by the police as well as by the protestors and those not insignificant numbers who come to watch this political theatre without ideological commitment, these spontaneous and ephemeral markets are the symptoms of a social intensity that the protests and rallies both constitute, and that their organizers attempt to structure towards political ends.[12] Yet, as anyone familiar with Thailand knows, the spectrum of political sayability is remarkably narrow, constrained by a prohibition on communism, an increasingly prosecuted *lèse-majesté* law, and a threat of force that repeatedly exercises itself in the name of order.[13] Nor do the protestors entirely disavow this containment; most are avowed anti-communists and staunchly monarchist.

The UDD claims to act largely in the interest of poor farmers (but see below), and has a logo reminiscent of the workerist aesthetics of the 1930s. While it is sometimes impugned for Maoism because its membership includes former members of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), its rank and file are generally reticent to avow revolutionary politics.[14] There are also former CPT members among the leaders of the

11 For a detailed ethnographic account of the place of music and the market in the red-shirt protests, see Benjamin Tausig, 'Bangkok is Ringing', PhD dissertation, New York University, 2013. See also Benjamin Tausig, 'Neoliberalism's Moral Overtones: Music, Money, and Morality at Thailand's Red Shirt Protests', *Culture, Theory and Critique* 55: 2 (2014).

12 I have discussed the significance of the ideologically uncommitted members in producing the image of the mass and the basis for mass-mediated political subjectivation in Rosalind C. Morris, 'Surviving Pleasure at the Periphery: Chiang Mai and the Photographies of Political Trauma in Thailand, 1976–1992', *Public Culture* 10: 2 (1998).

13 The tradition of using *lèse-majesté* to mitigate political opposition is long-standing in Thailand, but its increasing prosecution in the last decade can be variously read as a symptom of growing anxiety within the ruling military–monarchical alliance about the possibility of real republicanism, as the last gasp of an ageing monarch whose heir lacks popular support, or as a recognition of the increasingly significant role of ideological contest in the public sphere. On the history of the legal category and its political instrumentalization, see David Streckfuss, 'Kings in the Age of Nations: The Paradox of Lèse-Majesté as Political Crime in Thailand', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37: 3 (July 1995); and *Truth on Trial in Thailand: Defamation, Treason, and Lèse-Majesté* (London: Routledge, 2011). On recent cases, see Pavin Chachavalpongpun, 'Thailand tightens Lese-Majeste Screws', *Asia Sentinel*, 8 May 2013, available at asiasentinel.com. The most recent charge, brought in July 2014, accuses the former Pheua Thai MP and one-time UDD co-leader Colonel Apiwan Wiriyachai of making statements offensive to the monarchy during a rally speech in Petchaburi, in June 2011.

14 In an article published in *Asia Times* in May 2013, William Barnes made the assertion that the UDD was not only communist but actively avowing a violent overthrow of the government. He cited former CPT member Therdpoum Chaidee on the Maoist inspiration of the tactics following the grenade attacks that marred a 10 April protest rally, leading to twenty-five deaths and more than 800

yellow-shirted PAD, who similarly shirk the kind of radical negation (destruction of the state and appropriation of its apparatus) that a previous generation of Mao-inspired revolutionaries insisted was the precondition of liberation. There is, in fact, no correlation between previous affiliation and current ideological sympathies. In Thailand, former CPT members are as likely to speak of their revolutionary past as youthful delusion as they are to avow it in the form of nostalgic attachment. All the more remarkable, then, are the constantly resurgent crowds of people clamouring at the gates of power, calling for more representative government and, in the very presencing of their bodies, demonstrating their distrust of representation. Their materialization in the already-crowded streets is something like a short-circuiting of the representational process – a drive to access the political apparatus immediately.

Able neither to reconcile these contradictory forces nor to heal over the gap in the Symbolic where competing ideological commitments have sundered but not entirely replaced a fantasy of national unity, both groups hold fast to the idea of the monarchy as a force that can guarantee what otherwise seems destined to fracture irreparably: a singularity to stand in for the lack of either group's capacity to achieve universality. Yet, even as it avows its fidelity to the monarchy, the UDD and its supporters gravitate around the figure of Thaksin Shinawatra. Their cultic adoration of his person constitutes both a shadow of the royal cult and a throwback to those personality cults that were associated with the kind of class-party whose demise on the international stage made Thaksin's rise to power possible.

In those contexts where the working classes are putatively represented

injuries. According to Barnes, Therdpoum explains the red-shirt movement's adulation of Thaksin as a temporary but affectively necessary stage in the longer-term movement towards socialism. But he also quotes Jaran Dittapichai as saying that the protest group had adopted 'Mao Zedong's method of thinking' and some of his techniques, including the establishment of a united front'. He continues: 'I was a communist and several leaders were former communists . . . but the red shirt people don't like communism or socialism.' See William Barnes, 'Thai Power Grows from the Barrel of a Gun', *Asia Times*, 13 May 2010, available at atimes.com. For a stinging rebuttal of Barnes and Therdpoum, see the anonymous blog of the Political Prisoners of Thailand, wherein its authors both question the degree to which red-shirt members actually desired the return of Thaksin (in 2010) and cast aspersions on Therdpoum's own analysis of Maoism: 'Mao's main revolutionary strategy was countryside encircling the cities and peasant revolution. The current actions look more like the Paris Commune than a rural-based armed revolution.' See Political Prisoners of Thailand, 'Red Shirts as Communists', 18 May 2010, at thaipoliticalprisoners.wordpress.com. At the time, Yingluck Shinawatra had not yet entered the scene as heir and proxy for her brother, and it was possible to imagine that the movement would evade the populist temptations of the cult of personality. Since then, it is possible to discern both an ideological maturation in the movement's leadership, which takes its distance from Thaksinism, and a hardening of Thaksin loyalism among ordinary members.

by a class-party, the accusation of the cult of personality derives from the presumption that the party and the people are one, that there is a perfect adequacy between its rule and their desire. In such cases, claims Alain Badiou, a popular attachment to a single figure is at once an acknowledgment of the non-identity between class and party (whether because of bureaucratism or hierarchization) and the expression of a need to guarantee the legitimacy of that party – a need whose only satisfaction comes in the form of a 'representation of the representation'. Badiou refers to this as a singularity, for which the name of the leader, the figure of a single person, comes to function as both displacement and image.[15]

Now, Thailand has never had anything like a class-party of the sort experienced in China – that phenomenon 'brought to a point of paroxysm' in the Cultural Revolution. Political parties in Thailand have long been recognized for their fundamentally factional orientation.[16] The fact that parties are often dissolved and reconstituted under different names but with the same personnel and membership suggests the ephemerality of the form. Thus, for example, the Liberal Democratic Party merged with the Thai Rak Thai Party in 1998, which became the People's Power Party, itself banned along with its founder and leader, Thaksin Shinawatra, and supplanted by the Pheua Thai Party, for which Thaksin remains the titular head in exile. At the time of writing, there are six parties in the coalition government, five in opposition, six with no parliamentary representation, and five that are banned. Of the latter, all but the Communist Party of Thailand, which was banned in 1948, have been banned since 2007, all for ostensibly violating electoral laws. Almost all, it will be noted, have monikers of an emphatically populist sort: Thai Rak Thai ('Thais love Thais'), Pheua Thai ('For Thais'), Palang Prachachon ('People's Power'), Rak Prathet Thai ('Love Thailand Party'), Chart Pattana Pheua Phaendin ('National Development for the Homeland Party'), Mathubhum ('Motherland').

If, Thaksin can function as a singularity that claims to guarantee an otherwise impossible identity, then it is not one of party and class, but of party and people. This is not a function of his personal charisma, his vote-buying, his access to media, or even his pro-poor policies, though all play their roles in his popularity. It is, rather, overdetermined by the conditions in which class and party cannot function as a unity, not least because

15 Alain Badiou, 'The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution', transl. Bruno Bosteels, *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 13: 3 (Winter 2005), p. 505.

16 Kasian, 'Toppling Thaksin'.

extraneous forces – mainly those of global financial capital – dictate who wins an election and what policies will be tolerated, how much the national dividend will be socialized, and so forth. Nonetheless, the postulation of an identity between Thaksin and his supporters has to encompass the extravagant disparities of wealth and power that separate him, his family and his wealthy allies from the rural poor. To the extent that he can do so, he assumes a position that directly competes with that of the king – not because he aims to be king, or even a king-maker, as the cruder accusations would have it, but because of this capacity to serve as the representation of the representation. The very desire for such a figure testifies to the failure of the electoral system to produce an adequate representation of the interests of the complexly stratified populace in whose name the government governs, but especially those of the poor.

Sometimes, the groups of protestors are as small as a few hundred people, who assemble before a government office and present themselves to representative authorities as those who wish to be heard. On other occasions, these groups swell to several hundreds of thousands, as during the protests against the military coup of 1991, in the period preceding Thaksin's overthrow in 2006, or during the prolonged period between 2008 and 2010, when opponents and supporters of another military coup offer themselves to be seen within the international media circuitry that today confers objectivity without recognition. The same vacillation between small activist protests and large-scale demonstrative strikes, to use Rosa Luxemburg's typology, could be seen during the brief period following Yingluck Shinawatra's electoral victory.[17] Since her dismissal on 22 May 2014 by the military junta that refers to itself as the National Council of Peace and Order (NCPO, Thai: Khana Raksa Khwam Sangop Haeng Chat, or คสช), the prohibition on such assemblages, partially justified by recourse to the negative image it produces of Thailand in the Western media, has largely been observed. Protestors can present themselves only as petitioners seeking the military's protection or the enactment of existing commitments, and strict limits on the number of people who may assemble in public to prevent such petitions from coalescing into more general strikes.

What distinguishes the protests of the last decade from those that preceded it, however, is the co-presence of opposed crowds, signified by the colours of their shirts: yellow for those who support the coup(s) in the name of monarchy, stability, and anti-corruption, and red for those who

17 Rosa Luxemburg, 'Mass Strike, Party and Trade Unions', in Dick Howard, ed., *Rosa Luxemburg: Selected Political Writings* (London/New York: Monthly Review, 1971).

support Thaksin and Yingluck, in the name of democratic proceduralism and the rights of the rural poor (mainly from the north and north-east). As late as 1992, the space of protest was polarized in a relatively dyadic manner: on one side were the protestors (at that time, mainly middle-class champions of electoral democracy); on the other were the state forces, the military and police representatives of its monopoly on violence. The new scene, which is precisely correlated with the rise of the Shinawatra family and media politics in the aftermath of the 1997 financial crisis, must be grasped as a triadic formation.[18] This triadic structure now also includes a social materialization of the force that the military and police would otherwise represent, albeit in the ironic form of violent immediacy. Where once the state's armed forces could exercise violence in the name of the citizenry (the people of the nation, *Chat Thai*) and thus preserve a relatively exclusive representational function in the very moment that they abrogated it, the official representatives of the Thai people no longer stand alone against those who compete for that status. The yellow-shirted presence in the streets is a kind of dangerous supplement to the military, calling it forth and exposing its lack of self-evident authority at the same time that it points out the vulnerability of the representative apparatus to its own negation.

The profundity of the transformation indicated by this newly triangulated confrontation, which nonetheless devolves into the primary dyad of pro- and contra-coup, cannot be overestimated. The protests against the government in favour of the state, or against the military in the name of bureaucratic proceduralism, make recourse to the same methods, but operate in different names. That they require these names, as guarantees of their authority and signifiers of their truth, tells us how tenuous is the

18 Thaksin's prime ministership was not the first time that a member of the family had held high office. Indeed, a recent study by the Siam Intelligence Unit has argued that the Shinawatra family should be recognized as comparable to the illustrious Ghandi-Nehru dynasty, on the basis that the family has collectively held three prime ministerships if one includes that of Somchai Wongsawat (a brother-in-law to both Thaksin and Yingluck, who was briefly in the prime-ministerial office in 2008, following the coup that ousted Thaksin). Two other members, including Thaksin's father, Lert, have been members of parliament representing Chiang Mai; one of these (Suraphan) having also served in the cabinet of Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhaven (1988–91) before it was deposed in a coup. Still another (Sujate) served as mayor of the northern capital city. Be that as it may, the basis of the Shinawatra family's power lies in its multi-sectoral economic power, which started with the capitalization of the silk industry in the early decades of the twentieth century, when the Chinese immigrant family also changed its Chinese clan name (they originally emigrated from Guangdong) to Shinawatra. Their empire later came to encompass retail (of both orchids and fuel), transport and telecommunications. See Siam Intelligence Unit, 'The Shinawatra Family Tree', *New Mandala*, 8 August 2011, at asiapacific.anu.edu.au.

project of representative government in the current era, and how incapable it is of generating the discourse within which the facticity of the moment can be conceptualized, its truth attested.

The Class of 2014; Class in 2014

Analysts have repeatedly diagnosed the theatricalized, mass-mediatized confrontation between red and yellow shirts in terms of the class dynamics that they supposedly encode, with yellow shirts supported by the Bangkok middle classes, its intelligentsia, and the Siamese elite, and red shirts expressing the interests and aspirations of farmers, but also the elites of the northern and north-eastern provinces. The UDD describes its own membership in more classically proletarian terms, as follows: 'Most Red Shirts are ordinary working class Thais. They include unregistered laborers, farmers, the poor and those who don't qualify for any kind of welfare or pension. Red Shirts also include employees in industries and other services such as restaurant and hotel (*sic*).'[19] Nonetheless, and despite extreme poverty among some of Thailand's farmers, the agricultural sector of the north and north-east is one of significant and increasing internal stratification, a situation quite different from that which characterized the more feudal pattern of earlier decades, or even the era of initial capitalization, when so many were stranded between subsistence farming and tenancy based in landlessness. The last two decades have seen the emergence of a substantial stratum of middle-income farmers who are engaged in cash cropping, diversified investment strategies, and various kinds of small-scale entrepreneurialism. In many households, one or more members migrate for wage-labour either to Bangkok or other parts of South East Asia and the Gulf states, on both seasonal and longer-term bases. Those who move along the circuits of migrancy have acquired new forms of cultural literacy and cosmopolitan consumer aesthetics that they have now implanted in their home communities, where they compete with a more nostalgic, verily Georgic valorization of rural authenticity. Cash and credit flows have infused the rural areas with the media of accumulation, and large-scale infrastructural development projects have enabled middle-income farmers to reap the benefits of transnational capital networks – including the employment of more destitute migrant labour from neighbouring Cambodia and Laos.

19 'Who Are We?' – official blog of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship, available at thairedshirts.org.

The result has been a displacement of the axioms that previously oriented analyses of the rural–urban relation in Thailand. The red-shirt movement is, in this sense, one expression of the more general transformation of so-called peasant politics, such that the demand for inclusion and recognition now sounds louder than any call for an alternative to capitalist development. Indeed, it is against the backdrop of the middle-income farmers' emergence and in the shadow of their astute engagement with state authorities, particularly under Thaksin's policy of productive specialization ('one Tambon, one product'), that the murmur of protest and the call for more subsidies has assumed its current form.[20]

The subsidy programmes of the Shinawatra governments have actually been quite diverse, not only in the commodities covered but in the form of the subsidy. Rice is subsidized at the level of guaranteed prices, paid directly to farmers by a national body that then stockpiles and sells the grain on the world market. Since 2011, diesel fuel has been subsidized on the principle of maximum pump prices. Under Yingluck's government, the UDD solicited Pattaya's rubber farmers with a proposed strategy of government subsidies for production costs, rather than a guaranteed price per kilogram, on the grounds that the latter would by reaped by middlemen only. That protestors had demanded a guaranteed fixed price, and that the UDD had taken upon itself to organize a conference to persuade them otherwise indicates the degree to which the UDD has matured into an ideological apparatus tied to the state, albeit at the fringe of the party system.[21] But it also shows up the complexity of the rural world. The articulate volubility of those middle-income farmers, some of whom also operate wholesale businesses and thus function as middlemen, is directed at the pursuit of profits from exchange as much as support for production. Without irony, then, one may postulate that the emergence of the new class of middle-income farmers signals the end of the discourse of class, precisely because it interrupts the fantasy of class unity and its capacity for universalization at the spatialized periphery of the national economy.

In direct proportion to the class differentiation of the agricultural sector, the hyperbolization of national unity has gathered its force. This is

20 On the rise of this new class of middle-income farmers, see Andrew Walker, *Thailand's Political Peasants: Power in the Modern Rural Economy* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012).

21 Daeng, 'UDD Press Conference on September 4th, 2013', published on official blog of the UDD, at thairedshirts.org. In May 2014, rice farmers in Krabi Province, led by Boonsong Nabthong, head of the Krabi Rubber Farmers Association, nonetheless claimed that they had not yet been paid their subsidy and were petitioning the NCPO for its disbursement.

why protest is so vehemently carried out in the name of the people. This is also no doubt why the southern provinces feature so little in the current conflict. The ambivalence of the latter region and the relative absence of its four southernmost provinces from protest is significantly determined by the long-standing Islamic nationalist movement there, and the fact that Thaksin's government maintained previous regimes' Buddhist chauvinism (inscribed in the monarchy, defined as head of the Buddhist sangha) towards its populace, exercising extreme force against its insurgent groups, authorizing extrajudicial killing, and deploying emergency powers in a manner that enabled widespread abuse of police powers. Part of Thailand only by virtue of annexation in the early twentieth century, and historically marginal to the Siamese-centric category of Thainess, the southernmost provinces' struggle for sovereignty has also been transformed by Islamist internationalism and the War on Terror. But this does not mean that it lies beyond the populist dynamic that infuses the yellow- and red-shirt protests. An ironic confluence of circumstances and discourses organized by cultural (religious) axiomatics and new economic logics has, in fact, led to a resonant, if antithetical, set of populisms in both the north and the south.

In Thailand, both populism and the accusation of populism are modes of asserting (not necessarily constituting) an identity in the form of a people. The pivot between them is the name under which they gather, and the location of that name in the political field: it is either absolutely central or absolutely exterior. The concept of the people is, course, predicated on both a fantasy of identity and a postulation of antagonism. This antagonism is projected outward, precisely in order that another, prior and structuring antagonism internal to the society – that which in a previous era went unselfconsciously by the name of class – can be disavowed. This is true even when the claimants to the status of popular representativeness ground their petition in their marginality and in opposition to an elite, whose very elevation is read as evidence of a breach in the body politic. Since the defeat of communism in Thailand, anti-elitism has been relatively tempered, with the result that populism blends imperceptibly into nationalism. And given the structured function of the monarchy (see below), there is an absolute limit to the possibility that populism can become the basis for a more radically egalitarian political ambition. It is precisely in the gap between populism and egalitarianism that the nationalist vilification of ethnic others acquires its force.

The gesture by which red- or yellow-shirt protestors assert their status as

'real' Thais, or as the 'true' people, or, more likely, as the bearers of a specifically Thai moral truth, provides the rhetorical instanciation of this logic, but it is most palpable in the activities of the yellow-shirted People's Alliance for Democracy (PAD), who have coupled their opposition to Thaksin with a vigorous agitation against Cambodian claims to the UNESCO-designated world heritage site of Wat Prasat Preah Vihear (Cambodian)/Wat Phra Wiharn (Thai). In the process, they have revived nationalist dreams of an expanded Thai polity that dates back to the 1860s, though it has lain relatively dormant since the time of Sarit Thanarat's dictatorial reign (1957–63), when the International Court of Justice recognized Cambodia as the legitimate authority.[22] Since the coup of May 2014, the NCPO's Committee on Solving Migrant Problems has undertaken a stringent purging of so-called illegal migrant labourers, instigating the largest mass migration in mainland Southeast Asia since the end of the Vietnam wars. It is estimated that, during the first four months following the coup, between 100,000 and 225,000 Cambodian migrants crossed back into their home country either out of fear or by direct deportation, while uncounted numbers of Burmese and Lao workers have similarly fled.[23] The particular plight of the Cambodians, who do not constitute a majority of migrant labourers in Thailand, is linked to the fact that Thaksin had strong ties to the Cambodian president Hun Sen, so there is a degree to which anti-Cambodian xenophobia collapses into opposition to Thaksin. Nonetheless, nationalist sentiment suffuses the entire field of conflict, and is encoded in the protests of both red and yellow shirts, both of whom claim to want to preserve a government of the people headed by the king – even when they do so with Thaksin as their leader. The continued and merciless exclusion of the Rahingya exiles from Burma, reveals the degree to which this nationalism exceeds the question of Cambodia, or the negative identification of Thaksin with Cambodian interests.

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22 Puangthong R. Pawakapan, *State and Uncivil Society in Thailand at the Temple of Preah Vihear* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2013). The Cambodian acceptance of French protectorship was undertaken partly in an effort to stave off encroachments from both the west (Thailand) and the east (Vietnam). It was under the influence of French orientalism that the drive to claim Khmer archaeological remnants of ancient imperial glory occurred, with Wat Preah Vihear and Angkor Wat occupying the centre of that effort. During its period of alliance with Japan in World War II, Thailand attempted to extend its control over the rural provinces on the border, and especially the temple, but with the transfer of alliance to the allies, and the demise of French colonial authority in the region, Prince Sihanouk took the case of contested border territory to the International Court of Justice, which found in Cambodia's favour in 1962.

23 Charlie Thame, 'Ominous Signs for Migrant Workers in Thailand', *New Mandala*, 15 June 2014, at asiapacific.anu.edu.au.

This insistence on the representational legitimacy of the sovereign acquires its importance partly because it marks the dividing line between populism and communism, but in a negative and indeed illusory manner. If communism divides, if its name marks a kind of rupture and scission in political history, then the disavowal of communism often takes the form of a claim to the popular and an accusation that the enemy has confused the two. The red-shirted UDD, for example, insists on its numerical representativeness, claiming a membership of several million and asserting a meagre few thousand among its yellow-shirted opponents. Its authority is grounded in a logic of the count. Nonetheless, the first of its six principles discloses the ambiguity of its aspiration to self-governance and popular sovereignty: 'To attain true democracy with sovereignty truly in the hands of the people of Thailand with the King as the head of state.'[24]

Opposing this logic of the count, but straining to sustain the claim to representativeness, the yellow-shirted PAD and its supporters accuse the Thaksin regime not only of republicanism (and hence *lèse-majesté*), but of parliamentary dictatorship. As Michael Connors so deftly argues, the concept of parliamentary dictatorship (*phetjakan ratthasupha*) emerged during the period when Thailand was transitioning from the severely 'despotic paternalism' that had characterized the dictatorship of Sarit to the kind of liberal military regime embodied in the National Peace-Keeping Council (NPKC), installed in 1991 by General Suchinda Khraprayoon.[25] The NPKC's reign was associated with the bloodiest suppression of oppositional protests since the massacre of student activists at Thammasat University in October 1976, but its discourse was that of peace-keeping rather than rule, of management rather than force. Commencing an entirely new era of military–monarchical alliance, the doctrine of parliamentary dictatorship, which arose in the 1980s and then authorized the NPKC's assumption of power, was predicated on a somewhat distorted reading of the Rousseauian doctrine of the social contract. Emphasizing a notion of the collective will as something irreducible to the sum of individual wills, the new doctrine claimed that the collective will could be represented equally well by elected or appointed representatives, and by the military itself.[26] Connors quotes a widely circulated

24 'The Six Principles', published on the official blog of the UDD, at thairedshirts.org.

25 Michael Kelly Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).

26 Ibid., pp.187–8.

pedagogical text written for members of the military, which states the matter with tautological self-certainty: 'When the military is the people's it can do the people's duty because the military, which has power, can use that power in place of the people. This means the people's power is with the military itself.'[27]

Long before Yingluck Shinawatra would seem to have assumed the role of Antigone in the Siamese form of Hegelian tragedy, then, Connors discerned the rise of a neo-Hegelian political theory (he refers to it as *nearly* Hegelian) at the heart of the new Thai order – one that works by dissociating numerical representativeness from the moral representation of the otherwise secreted will of the people. In this scheme, parliamentary dictatorship is something like the political theory of vote-buying, which is itself the means by which the collective will is both divided and subverted. Under the new doctrine, the justification of military rule arises in the very moment when the problematic status of the people's will arises. Someone must determine what it is, and must arbitrate between the competing claims on its behalf – claims that are otherwise made via the institutional medium of the electoral party or some other organ of civil society. Precisely because they compete in a public sphere defined by that purpose, the claims fail to provide the guarantee of their own veracity. As a corollary, the Thai party system, largely modelled on the US system, though with more numerous electoral parties, is subjected to a permanent and radical scepticism.

Now, the response to the indeterminacy that such a predicament generates has recourse to one of two models. Either there is a postulation of a sacred centre around which the polity revolves, one that provides an absolute guarantee of the truth and authority of the ruling power's representativeness; or there is an ejection of that guarantee into a domain outside of the political altogether. That exteriority is variously conceived as an economic force or a secular truth. Connors, with most other scholars of Thai political history, avows the first hypothesis. He describes the pragmatic melding of Western political theory with 'Thai traditionalism' as a strategy for resolving the 'tension between rights and duties by conflating freedom with actions in accordance with the general will'. In doing so, he confirms Chalermkiat Phiu-nuan's thesis that the entire process is 'mediated at the deepest level by "unconscious" efforts to

27 Ibid., p. 108. Connors is citing, 'Ekkasan prakop kansuksa khrongkan 6601' ('Learning Material for Project 6601'), in *Chamlae naiyobai kongthap* ('Dissecting Military Policy'), n.d., pp. 142–56.

reproduce the stabilizing role of a sacred center at the heart of a chaotic whole, operationalized by the military and symbolized by the monarchy'.[28]

Before we consider the question of whether a sacral centring or a radical evacuation of the political is at stake, it is important to situate the new theory in relation to the history by which communism was displaced by and absorbed into a new kind of populist nationalism – a development linked to the fact that the end of the communist insurgency was not achieved militarily. The political education of the so-called democratic soldiers, to which Connors refers us, arose as part of an effort to redirect the counterintelligence programme of the Thai military through a strategy of national encompassment, supplanting earlier efforts to vilify CPT members as un-Thai, or indeed anti-Thai.[29] It was at this point that the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) began actively to promote poverty-amelioration programmes rather than the more narrow counterinsurgency efforts that had defined the conflict during the 1970s.[30] In other words, the military acknowledged the truth about inequality and rural poverty, and undertook to mitigate its most extreme forms in order to prevent the generalization of the communist hypothesis *tout cort*.

There is, therefore, an obscure continuity between the military strategy of poverty relief developed in the 1980s, and what has come to be written under the name of Thaksin-ism. But this continuity is also the source of conflict at the profoundest level of political logic. The military strategy included the enrolment of the king in various rural development projects, culminating in the elaboration of a doctrine promoting 'sufficiency economy'. Although entirely derivative (and barely concealing its origin in the anthropological rhetoric of subsistence economics and moral economies, though embedding it in developmentalism), the branding of this doctrine under the signature of Bhumipol Adulyadej effectively re-signifies the monarchy as an institution whose moral authority derives from its pure

28 Connors, *Democracy and National Identity in Thailand*, pp. 108–9. See also Chalermiat Phiu-nuan, *Khwaamkhit thangkanmeuang khong thahan thai 2519–2535* ('Political Thought of the Thai Military, 1976–1992') (Bangkok: Samnakphim phujatkan, 1992).

29 The vilification of communists as un-Thai defined counterinsurgency efforts in the 1960s and early '70s, and was institutionalized in ritualized cults like the Village Scouts movement, but also surreptitiously signified in the insistent refusal to translate 'communism' into Thai. The word is merely transliterated. See Katherine Bowie, *Rituals of National Loyalty: An Anthropology of the State and the Village Scout Movement in Thailand* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

30 Chai-Anan Samudivanija, Kusuma Snitwongse and Suchit Bunbonkamet, *From Armed Suppression to Political Offensive: Attitudinal Transformation of Thai Military Officers since 1975* (Bangkok: Institute of Security and International Studies, Chulalongkorn University, 1990).

expression of the collective interest.[31] This is a significant reformulation of the principle of sacral kingship, which, far from being attenuated in the process of being subjected to representational logics, gathers additional force.[32]

The transformation of the monarch into a charitable functionary, which can be seen in places as distant as Britain and the Netherlands, has, in Thailand, been the mode of a ritual intensification. Instead of soliciting identification via the discourse of the 'common touch', it has underscored a fantastic exceptionalism whereby the king's capacity to reach across the threshold of his own sacrality becomes testimony to his uncommon genius. The same cannot be said for Thaksin, whose very exceptionality (his extraordinary wealth) has prompted his defenders to identify with him on the basis that he is as subject to military violence and government abuse as are they.[33] His commonness, which derives partly from the fact that he is the product of an economic logic – financial capital – that has no radical outside, also means that he cannot quite occupy the place of the monarch. The military nonetheless worries that this might occur. They have been able to contain the veritable cult of personality surrounding Thaksin largely by ensuring his exile. Nonetheless, Thaksin's image has acquired verily auratic power in Thailand. When, in July 2014, police broke up a Pheua Thai party event and demanded that celebrants of his birthday remove his images from the walls, they were specifically implying that they were being treated in the same fashion as royal images – images that are legally protected and mandated in all public spaces. The officials imply an aspiration to sacral centrality on Thaksin's part. However, the very fact that a contest can be perceived indicates the degree to which the country is now feeling the effect of that process described by Claude Lefort as the evacuation of the political centre in liberal democratic regimes.[34]

31 This has not stopped the United Nations Development Project from recognizing the 'Sufficiency Economy' as a gift,'bestowed' on the Thai people by King Bhumiphol Adulyadej. See *Thailand Human Development Report: Sufficiency Economy and Human Development* (Bangkok: UNDP, 2007), p. iii. The term rendered in English as 'sufficiency' is *por piang* in Thai, which implies something more ambiguous. See Pornpimol Kanchanalak, 'His Majesty the King's Sufficiency Theory Goes Global', *Nation*, 3 October 2013, available at nationmultimedia.com.

32 Benedict Anderson long ago recognized the trajectory of the Thai monarchy during the twentieth century as one of resacralization, unlike almost every other monarchical tradition in the world. See his 'Studies of the Thai State: The State of Thai Studies', in Eliezer B. Ayal, ed., *The Study of Thailand: Analyses of Knowledge, Approaches, and Prospects in Anthropology, Art History, Economics, History and Political Science* (Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, 1978), pp. 193ff.

33 Morris, 'Intimacy and Corruption'.

34 Claude Lefort, 'The Permanence of the Theological–Political?' in *Democracy and Political Theory*, transl. David Macey (New York: Polity, 1991).

One can see the symptoms of that process most visibly in the dilemmas surrounding the translation of the famously regressive constitution of 2007, which replaced what had otherwise been construed as the most democratic constitution ever promulgated in Thailand. An initial translation into English led to the description of the Thai form of government as a 'constitutional monarchy'. Quickly realizing the consequence of this nomination, the government authorities issued a correction that makes visible something of the ambiguity in the Thai word for 'democracy', while implying that the monarchy is actually less central than exterior to the polity. The official name for the form of government in Thailand is 'democratic government with the King as Head of the State'. The word for democracy in Thai is *prachathipatai*, *pracha* referring to people as in *prachachon* and *thipatai*, meaning sovereign. Article 3 of the constitution states that 'the sovereign Power belongs to the Thai people. The King as the Head of the State shall exercise such power through the National Assembly, Council of Ministers, and the Courts.' In other words, the king exercises the power that belongs to the people; he exceeds them and encompasses them – not in order to be one with them, but in order that they be, for, as Article 1 states, 'Thailand is one and indivisible.' The king is not, technically speaking, subject to the constitution, and its principles are organized to prevent any contradiction between government and monarchical interest. This is why criticism of constitutionally mandated institutions and laws is vulnerable to the charge of *lèse-majesté*. It is therefore interesting to reflect upon the very history of the widely divergent idioms in which that accusation has attired itself during the long reign of the present monarch. These idioms comprise the rhetoric of Thai militarism, the particular dialects of coup-making.

The coup of 1951 legitimized itself on the grounds that revolutionaries working in the name of peace (and non-alignment) were threatening national unity and morals. By 1958, which saw the coup that established Thailand's most authoritarian regime under General Sarit, it was not the revolutionaries of peace but communism that provided the alibi for military intervention, this time through the adumbration of an identity between communism and anti-monarchism, as well as between communism and anti-tradition. The identification of the sovereignty of the sovereign with that of the people was initially accomplished by the military in this very move to expel communism, as the bearer of alterity, unconsciously recognizing its inventive potential. And, as we have seen, the end of that era coincided with the rise of the concept of parliamentary

dictatorship. That rhetoric emerged with the fragmentation of previous alliances between particular parties and capital cliques, as the country emerged into new Tiger status. The hallmarks of that period were accelerating economic growth, the expansion of the manufacturing sector and the stock exchange, widespread real estate speculation, and the dramatic rise of import demand. In the 1980s, electoral office was a necessary means for accessing state resources, and increasing numbers of people who had formerly exercised local power via networks of immediate patron–clientship and economic monopolies entered the electoral process. As Benedict Anderson has noted, the importance of electoral office was signified by the very degree to which candidates for office were targeted for assassination.[35] But by 1991, under the guise of parliamentary dictatorship, a coup could appear as a mechanism to restrict government regulation of the economy, and as a means of restabilizing the power of big business, which otherwise might appear threatened by liberal-democratic proceduralism.[36] Needless to say, the decisive events in Germany and the Soviet Union played their part in enabling this entrenchment of capitalist interests in the governing body, under the banner of restitution. That restitution concealed itself in the discourse of cultural revival – and coincided precisely with the revivification of the silk industry, the resignification of tourism as a cultural encounter, and the investment in high-end artisanal production for export.

The coup of 1991 was undertaken with the king's explicit approval. The sovereign is now a decrepit old man in whom the two bodies of the king have already begun to dissociate, so that the image is becoming a mere corpse and the institution a hollow crown. He is often unable to address his people despite a rising tide of anxiety over his heir's possible incompetence. But this only intensifies the sense of the military's likely intervention – and the defensive nature of prosecution for *lèse-majesté*. If, as Claude Lefort has said, democracy functions on the basis of a vacancy at the heart of the political, the real evacuation that may occur upon the death of Bhumipol Adulyadej threatens to reveal the fact that the king's presence covers over a symbolic absence – even in (especially in) a democratic government with the king as head of state. The task that the military has assumed for itself is that of foreclosure – abolishing from the national consciousness the thought of the king's symbolic vacuity, and making it

35 Benedict Anderson, 'Murder and Progress in Modern Siam', in *The Specter of Comparisons: Nationalism, Southeast Asia and the World* (London/New York: Verso, 2000).

36 Hewison, 'Of Regimes, State and Pluralities'.

appear a real threat borne by others: first by communists, and then by populists headed by Thaksin Shinawatra and his sororal proxy – a threat in the Real, and thus in the order of the event, where something new might actually arise.

The Culture of Coups?

If the monarch cannot quite guarantee the unity of the nation or the truth of the state's claim to incarnate the will of the people, the promise of national culture promises to fill the gap. There are really two cultures here. One is the dominant culture of the Siamese, which, since the fifth reign (1868–1910), has been hegemonized through language laws, national education and other means. It was against this internally colonial culture that many ethno-nationalist groups (including Muslim separatist groups in the four southern provinces, and Lao nationalists in the northeast) initially arrayed themselves, in solidarity with the CPT; and it was in solidarity with Siamese nationalism that the Socialist Party of Thailand finally broke with the CPT in 1981, just four years after joining the armed struggle against the state. The other 'culture' is the principle that immunizes inequality against political critique. There is a relation between them.

To understand this, it is useful to revisit the moment when the culture concept became an alibi for recasting the question of debt and inequality as one of a legitimate patron–clientship, rather than a function of property ownership and the violence of what Marx rightly called capitalism's most fetishistic phenomenon: interest-bearing capital. In 1957, just before Sarit assumed full powers, Jit Poumisak published *Chomna Sakdina Thai* ('The Real Face of Thai Feudalism Today').[37] In it, he attempted to import a mode of analysis that he had learned from reading the redacted works of Russian and Chinese Marxists published largely in *Mahachon*, the magazine of the CPT. The party was legitimate throughout the late forties, as a result of a US-brokered agreement permitting the establishment of a Soviet cultural office in Bangkok – part of the early post-war efforts of the United States to mitigate British neo-colonial ambitions in the region, and the ground for its own imperial aspirations. The Soviets

37 Jit Poumisak, *Chomna Sakdina Thai* ('The Real Face of Thai Feudalism') (Bangkok: Dork Ya, 2000 [1957]). For an English translation with an excellent introduction, see Craig J. Reynolds, *Thai Radical Discourse: The Real Face of Thai Feudalism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asian Programs, 1987).

had demanded recognition of the CPT, though the CPT would side with the Chinese following the Sino-Soviet split. Jit Poumisak's works were largely written under pen-names, and traversed a multiplicity of genres – poetry, historiography, ethnography, philology, and literary and arts criticism. Although he became a hero of student activists in the brief democratic experiment of 1973–76, he was dead by 1966 (at the hands of a reactionary village headman), and had by then spent six years in prison. In fact, he was only granted the status of party member posthumously. Moreover, his great work, arguing for the feudality of contemporary Thai society, was never taken up by the CPT, which endorsed instead the position of its secretary general, Udom Sisuwan, who argued for a semi-feudal, semi-colonial model as the framework for analyzing Thailand's modernity.

At the centre of the debates inaugurated by Jit is the concept of *sakdina*/*saktina*, a term that originally referred to the ranks and gradations used in the Sukhothai period to denote landholdings, and extended by Jit and others to refer to a mode of power based in ownership of land. On one hand, Jit's use of the concept was intended to displace then dominant forms of historiography that were not only grounded in monarchical biography but grasped dependency in a personalistic idiom, as the gift of security from power; on the other, it was an effort to evade the ethnocentric implications of Marx's thesis on the Asiatic Mode of Production.

After the collapse of the democratic experiment in Thailand and the violent suppression of student activists at Thammasat University on 6 October 1976, Jit's thesis enjoyed increasing renown, if only as an effect of his signature: the thesis was not only that *sakdina* power originally lay in the ownership of land, but that the monopoly on land was the original cause of peasant indebtedness, because the usufructory allocations given to former slaves (when slavery was abolished) were too small to enable subsistence, and because the primary financers of loans were the 'masters of the land', in whom ownership and policing functions were united. The much-disputed centrality of slavery in Jit's account does not derive from the fact that he makes slavery the origin of the Siamese polity (it is not a question of rule and rights), but from the fact that it makes the ending of slavery the origin of capitalism. In Jit's account, the freeing of slaves was the basis of what Marx called *ursprüngliche Akkumulation*, or 'originary accumulation'. The freed peasants could borrow money to purchase food that their own production did not generate; but paying rates of 37.5 per cent per month, and with the right to mortgage their usufruct, they were

quickly rendered landless and indebted, while the landlords accumulated liquid capital without having to relinquish their attachment to the land. At stake was the conversion of land into interest-bearing capital through the intervention of law, and the corollary of violent liberation into employability, but not necessarily employment, of the rural population.

Although most scholars disavowed the place of slavery in Jit's analysis, his popularity lasted during the period of guerrilla warfare, when many students went into the jungle to join the armed struggle. During the 1980s, as many emerged to accept the military amnesty (offered in 1982), Jit's position came under increasing fire, and was then displaced by an argument that power in Thai history did not rest in control over land, but in control over persons, whose scarcity and capacity to flee in a relatively underpopulated space had given them a certain freedom. The figure of the slave came back in the watered-down image of lord and bondsman (*chaofa/phrai*) in a mutually sustaining dialectic of recognition. The combination of relative freedom and culturally mediated but personally avowed dependency was implicitly assumed not only in nationalist ideology, which fetishistically remarked the meaning of *thai* (free) in the national moniker, but in the fluorescence of work on patron–client relationships as the basis of Thai society. This work found its most articulate incarnation in the writings of the Community Culture school of social sciences.[38] Former student activists and amnestied internal exiles, the scholars of this school claimed, as Chaiyan Vaddhanaphuti says, that their experience in the jungle had taught them that class analysis was itself violent, and that the admittedly hierarchical relations of rural communities were the source of a cultural meaningfulness that could not be disavowed. In place of class, they proffered community culture as the idiom for avowing inequality as the ironic defence against more violent and more ostensibly antisocial forms of domination generated by neo-colonialism and global finance. In the process, of course, they embraced those very forms. By the end of the 1980s, Kasian Tejapira could write the history of Marxism in Thailand as itself a history of commodification.[39]

The well-intended culturalism of the Community Culture School had its truth, and it was the Thai form of a phenomenon that occurred

38 On the history of the community concept in Thai discourse, see Craig J. Reynolds, '*Chumchon*/Community' in Carol Gluck and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, eds, *Words in Motion: Toward a Global Lexicon* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).

39 Kasian Tejapira, *Commodifying Marxism: The Formation of Radical Thai Culture* (Singapore: Trans Pacific, 2001).

elsewhere in all those places where the violence of anti-colonial wars and of militant anti-capitalism had taken its toll, and then been ridiculed by the violence of the party-states. Nonetheless, the rise of the Community Culture School indexed the rapprochement between critical scholarship and military–monarchical ideology, the culmination of which can be seen in the participation of so many social and political theorists in the constitution-writing process undertaken during the post-1991 coup government of Anand Phanyarachun, and in the endorsement of the anti-Thaksin coups by so many in the academic sphere.

When some generals and more conservative members of the PAD initially accused Thaksin's supporters of communist sympathies, they were derided and rebuked by the professional middle classes for whom the fall of the Soviet Union had made such accusations anachronistic at best. But the communist/anti-communist dyad (both a period and an analytic) and its double displacement by the community culture model, on one hand, and the discourse of parliamentary dictatorship, on the other, bequeathed a powerful residual force with which to exercise the interests of both capital and military – namely, the revised concept of the sovereign as a being beyond the state, not so much an origin of legitimacy or a foundational force as a guarantee of its unity, and thus its truth.

The military–monarchical alliance, which once appeared isomorphic with the national interest, can now do so only as a contradictory ruse, insofar as Thailand's economy, like all economies, is thoroughly embedded in a globalized network of financial forces that operate far above the state level (where they are operated by institutions like the IMF, the World Economic Forum and the World Bank). To the extent that the military enacts the interests of big business, one might say, it is serving forces that exceed and contradict the nation. Like Hegel's Antigone, they are beholden to the very law they appear to oppose. So, too, is the populist Thaksin, whose apparent devotion to the men and women of the soil is enabled by his engagement with global financial capital.

The catastrophic financial crisis of 1997, which commenced a spiralling implosion of the South East Asian markets, is widely believed to have been precipitated, if not caused, by the currency speculations of George Soros and those who followed his lead in betting against the baht. Such speculation was only possible under the conditions of financial globalization. And it was in the aftermath of that crisis that Thaksin arose, initially creating the Thai Rak Thai Party, and running for election on a platform

of rebuilding national capital. The fervent nationalism of that early moment in the Thaksin era quickly came under scrutiny precisely because he could not match his rhetoric with the practice of his own activities as a capitalist. His investments in global telecommunications systems – as well as his company's sale of shares to non-Thai investors – were frequently adduced as examples of a failure to sufficiently enact the national interest. Thaksin's turn to the rural periphery – and to his own base in the north – thus appears as a kind of counter-move in the strategic game of claiming the people.

One must also recognize here the degree to which the accusations against and defences of the Shinawatra governments collude to conceal the otherwise capital-friendly nature of what is, otherwise, a generally neoliberal orientation among the Phuea Thai. Proposals for tax-free special development zones on the rural periphery and other incentives to encourage foreign direct investment were significant parts of the Yingluck government's platform and were pursued by the military junta even after her overthrow. Consumer-friendly loan programmes targeting the middle and upper classes, which aimed to invigorate the Thai economy – even if that meant underwriting purchases of fifth cars – accompanied micro-credit for farmers. Critics who see in Thaksin's policies a modified version of Keynesianism recognize the combination of efforts to stimulate individual consumption with massive developmental schemes that enhance employment; but the economic development zones are a particular symptom of the capital mobility characteristic of a financialized world quite different than Keynes's.

In the end, perhaps, the phenomenon of Thaksinism must be read symptomatically – as an index of a set of contradictions whose resolution is no longer deemed possible but whose recognition cannot be avowed. The Thai polity is divided internally, by forces that exceed it without being exterior to it, in a globalized and financialized economy that knows no alternative. This is the essence of its tragedy, a contradictory totality in concrete existence, displaced and given its image in the melodrama of the Shinawatra family's repeated rise and fall from power. However, Thaksinism expresses an aspiration for transformations as much as it exhibits the tendency for recapture by older forces that promise to establish unity through recourse to a sacral centre and the projection of internal antagonisms onto ethnic others. The feared destitution of the monarchy and the rise of populism are the flipsides of each other – expressions of a drive for a unity that cannot but betray the violent difference that today

characterizes Thai society, and all others. The history of communism – displaced by the discourse of community culture and by the political accusation of parliamentary dictatorship – is, of course, the history of an idea, and not of a form, and it therefore remains to be seen what techniques may yet be invented to realize that idea. Even the knotted lineage that links the military's turn to poverty amelioration and the recruitment of the king into charitable developmentalism with the Shinawatra family's pro-poor policies, contains a tacit recognition that there is some truth in the communist hypothesis. Not even the idea of the people can be sustained in its absence.

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11 No Way Out? Communism in the New Century

Slavoj Žižek

A recent scientific report indicated how future biotechnology could be used to trick a prisoner's mind into thinking they have served a 1,000-year sentence: drugs could be developed to distort prisoners' minds into thinking time was passing more slowly. According to Rebecca Roache,

> there are a number of psychoactive drugs that distort people's sense of time, so you could imagine developing a pill or a liquid that made someone feel like they were serving a 1,000-year sentence. A second scenario would be to upload human minds to computers to speed up the rate at which the mind works. If the speed-up were a factor of a million, a millennium of thinking would be accomplished in eight and a half hours. Uploading the mind of a convicted criminal and running it a million times faster than normal would enable the uploaded criminal to serve a 1,000 year sentence in eight-and-a-half hours. This would, obviously, be much cheaper for the taxpayer than extending criminals' lifespans to enable them to serve 1,000 years in real time.[1]

An ethical twist is then added to the argumentation:

> Is it really OK to lock someone up for the best part of the only life they will ever have, or might it be more humane to tinker with their brains and set them free? When we ask that question, the goal isn't simply to imagine a bunch of futuristic punishments – the goal is to look at today's punishments through the lens of the future.

But what about the opposite intervention, which would enable us to make love for ten minutes and experience it as thousands of years? And

1 See Rhiannon Williams, 'Prisoners "Could Serve 1,000 Year Sentence in Eight Hours"', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 March 2014.

what about a life whose temporality could be totally manipulated in both directions, so that one can also make someone experience a ten-year prison sentence as something that lasts only ten minutes? How would such temporarily manipulated life look? How would it be experienced? In short, does this imagining of the consequences of the manipulability of our perception of time only along the lines of how it could render serving a prison sentence more productive not provide an extreme example of the misery and limitations of our imagination of the future? This limitation is clearly perceptible even when we are dealing with critical dystopias: dystopias that abound in recent blockbuster movies and novels (*Elysium*, *Hunger Games* . . .), although apparently leftist (presenting a post-apocalyptic society of extreme class divisions), are non-imaginative, monotonous, and also politically wrong. In political and economic theory, this limitation is most palpable not in radical utopian visions but precisely in 'modest' realist proposals. The title of Joseph Stiglitz's comment 'Democracy in the Twenty-First Century' refers to Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, with an important twist, shifting the accent from capitalism to our liberal-democratic political system – here is its concluding line of argumentation:

> What we have been observing – wage stagnation and rising inequality, even as wealth increases – does not reflect the workings of a normal market economy, but of what I call 'ersatz capitalism.' The problem may not be with how markets should or do work, but with our political system, which has failed to ensure that markets are competitive, and has designed rules that sustain distorted markets in which corporations and the rich can (and unfortunately do) exploit everyone else . . . Markets, of course, do not exist in a vacuum. There have to be rules of the game, and these are established through political processes . . . Thus, Piketty's forecast of still higher levels of inequality does not reflect the inexorable laws of economics. Simple changes – including higher capital-gains and inheritance taxes, greater spending to broaden access to education, rigorous enforcement of anti-trust laws, corporate-governance reforms that circumscribe executive pay, and financial regulations that rein in banks' ability to exploit the rest of society – would reduce inequality and increase equality of opportunity markedly. If we get the rules of the game right, we might even be able to restore the rapid and shared economic growth that characterized the middle-class societies of the mid-twentieth century. The main question

confronting us today is not really about capital in the twenty-first century. It is about democracy in the twenty-first century.[2]

In some formal sense this is, of course, true: the organization of a market economy is effectively possible only within legal coordinates that are ultimately decided by a political process. Stiglitz is also fully justified in pointing out that, in order to change capitalism effectively, we would also have to change the functioning of our democracy. Here, however, problems arise: In what precise sense is democracy a problem? It seems that, for Stiglitz, it is simply a question of enforcing new rules (laws regulating economic life) within the existing democratic framework – we need an elected government which would pass some 'simple changes' like 'higher capital-gains and inheritance taxes, greater spending to broaden access to education, rigorous enforcement of anti-trust laws, corporate-governance reforms that circumscribe executive pay, and financial regulations that rein in banks' ability to exploit the rest of society'. But can we really imagine the transformation of society being achieved like this? Here Marx's key insight remains valid, perhaps more than ever: for Marx, the question of freedom should not be located primarily in the political sphere proper (Does a country have free elections? Are its judges independent? Is its press free from hidden pressures? Does it respect human rights?). Rather, the key to actual freedom resides in the 'apolitical' network of social relations, from the market to the family. Here the change required is not political reform but a transformation of the social relations of production – which entails precisely revolutionary class struggle rather than democratic elections or any other 'political' measure in the narrow sense of the term. We do not vote on who owns what, or about relations in the factory, and so on – such matters remain outside the sphere of the political, and it is illusory to expect that one will effectively change things by 'extending' democracy into the economic sphere (by, say, reorganizing the banks to place them under popular control). Radical changes in this domain need to be made outside the sphere of legal 'rights'. In 'democratic' procedures (which, of course, can have a positive role to play), no matter how radical our anti-capitalism, solutions are sought solely through those democratic mechanisms which themselves form part of the apparatuses of the 'bourgeois' state that guarantees the undisturbed reproduction of capital. In this precise sense, Badiou was right to claim that today the name of the

2 Quoted from Joseph E. Stiglitz, 'Democracy in the Twenty-First Century', 1 September 2014, at project-syndicate.org.

ultimate enemy is not capitalism, empire, exploitation, or anything similar, but democracy itself. It is the 'democratic illusion', the acceptance of democratic mechanisms as providing the only framework for all possible change, which prevents any radical transformation of society. In this precise sense, Badiou was right in his apparently weird claim: 'Today, the enemy is not called Empire or Capital. It's called Democracy.'[3] It is the 'democratic illusion', the acceptance of democratic mechanisms as the ultimate frame of every change, that prevents the radical transformation of capitalist relations.

The field of capitalist economy, of the organization of production, exchange and distribution, has its own inertia and immanent movement, and the democratic political frame is already accommodated to this capitalist structure. To really change the capitalist structure, one must also change this democratic political frame; one cannot do it by enforcing changes through democratic electoral procedures which remain the same as before. Here, we encounter Stiglitz's second, Keynesian, limitation: Does his designation of the present economic system as '*ersatz* capitalism' not imply that there is another, proper capitalism, in which markets are really and fairly competitive, not our 'distorted markets in which corporations and the rich can (and unfortunately do) exploit everyone else'? We can see Stiglitz's wager here: by way of democratically enforcing legal changes, we can replace *ersatz* capitalism with a more just and efficient one, thus combining the best of capitalism with the best of democracy. But what if this entire idea is *utopian* in the strict sense of the term? What if what Stiglitz calls '*ersatz* capitalism' is simply capitalism as such, capitalism that follows its immanent development, and not its secondary perversion? That is to say, although capitalist markets 'do not exist in a vacuum', the political process of democracy also does not exist in a vacuum but is always overdetermined by economic relations.

Radical leftists all around Europe complain how today no one dares to really disturb the neoliberal dogma. The problem is real, of course – the moment one violates this dogma, or, rather, the moment one is just perceived as a possible agent of such disturbance, tremendous forces are unleashed. Although these forces appear as objective economic forces, they are effectively forces of illusions, of ideology – but their material power is nonetheless utterly destructive. We are today under the tremendous pressure of what we should call enemy propaganda – let me quote

3 Alain Badiou, 'Prefazione all'edizione italiana', in *Metapolitica* (Naples: Cronopio, 2002), p. 14.

Alain Badiou: 'The goal of all enemy propaganda is not to annihilate an existing force (this function is generally left to police forces), but rather to annihilate an *unnoticed possibility of the situation*.'[4] In other words, they are trying to *kill hope*: the message of this propaganda is a resigned conviction that the world we live in, even if not the best of all possible worlds, is the least bad one, so that any radical change can only make it worse.

Is there any emancipatory potential in so-called *Ostalgie*, the nostalgia for the socialist past in some post-communist countries? Boris Buden perspicuously noted that the post-communist *Ostalgie* in some Eastern European countries is not the longing for the lost emancipatory potential that survived in socialist regimes, but is structured like nostalgia for a lost culture, a lost way of life. (We are, of course, dealing with the retroactively constructed memory of mythic times when life was modest but stable and safe.) This is why getting rid of *Ostalgie* is a *sine qua non* of a renewed emancipatory movement in these countries. The large public which has no sympathy or longing for communism perceive it (from the standpoint of the neoliberal universe) as some weird foreign culture, incomprehensible and irrational in its premises and rituals. What the two opposed stances share is the same ignorance of the radical emancipatory dimension of the communist project: in both cases, communism is treated as a particular culture.[5]

This status of communism as a lost culture is part of a more general de-politicization: a new state of things is emerging in which political differences reappear as cultural differences. What Khomeini wrote decades ago allows us to understand why an attack on *Charlie Hebdo* can be considered appropriate: 'We're not afraid of sanctions. We're not afraid of military invasion. What frightens us is the invasion of Western immorality.'[6] Is *Charlie Hebdo* not the epitome of 'Western immorality'? The fact that Khomeini talks about fear, about what a Muslim should fear most in the West, should be taken literally: Muslim fundamentalists do not have any problems with the brutality of economic and military struggles, their true enemy is not Western economic neo-colonialism and military aggressiveness but its 'immoral' culture. The same holds for Putin's Russia, where the conservative nationalists define their conflict with the West as cultural, in the last resort focused on sexual difference.

4 Alain Badiou, Seminar on Plato at the ENS, 13 February, 2008 (unpublished). Emphasis in original.

5 See Boris Buden, *Zone des Uebergangs* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2009).

6 Ruhollah Khomeini, 'Quotes', at goodreads.com.

Apropos of the victory of the Austrian drag queen at the Eurovision contest, Putin himself told a dinner in St Petersburg: 'The Bible talks about the two genders, man and woman, and the main purpose of union between them is to produce children.'[7] As usual, the rabid nationalist Zhirinovsky was more outspoken, and 'called this year's result "the end of Europe", saying: "There is no limit to our outrage . . . There are no more men or women in Europe, just *it*.' Vice premier Dmitry Rogozin tweeted that the Eurovision result 'showed supporters of European integration their European future – a bearded girl'.[8] There is a certain uncanny, quasi-poetic beauty in this image of the bearded lady (for a long time the standard feature of cheap circus freaks) as the symbol of a united Europe; no wonder Russia refused to transmit the Eurovision contest to its TV public, with calls for a renewed cultural Cold War. Note the same logic as in Khomeini: rather than the army or economy, the truly feared object is immoral depravity, the threat to sexual difference: Boko Haram just brought this logic to the end. (Incidentally, Lacan's point is that the true threat is not polymorphous perversion which destabilizes, sometimes even ignores, sexual difference, but this difference itself in its antagonistic dimension of a non-relationship. The key reference to stable and normalized sexual difference in conservative political movements bears witness to the political relevance of Lacan's formula: 'There is no sexual relationship.')

In his analysis of today's return of religion as a political force, Boris Buden[9] rejected the predominant interpretation which sees this phenomenon as a regression caused by the failure of modernization. For Buden, religion as a political force is an effect of the post-political disintegration of society, of the dissolution of traditional mechanisms that guaranteed stable communal links: fundamentalist religion is not only political, it is politics itself, i.e. it sustains the space for politics. Even more poignantly, it is no longer just a social phenomenon but the very texture of society, so that in a way society itself becomes a religious phenomenon. It is thus no longer possible to distinguish the purely spiritual aspect of religion from its politicization: in a post-political universe, religion is the predominant space within which antagonistic passions return. What happened recently

7 James Edgar, 'Putin Attacks Eurovision Drag Artist Conchita for Putting Her Lifestyle "Up for Show"', *Daily Telegraph*, 26 May 2014.

8 Claire Hodgson, 'Conchita Wurst's Eurovision Win Slammed by Russia as Politician Brands It "the End of Europe"', *Daily Mirror*, 11 May 2014.

9 See Buden, *Zone des Uebergangs*.

in the guise of religious fundamentalism is thus not the return of religion in politics, but simply *the return of politics as such*.

Why, then, is Islam the most politicized religion today? Judaism is the religion of genealogy, of the succession of generations. When, in Christianity, the Son dies on the Cross, this means that the Father also dies (as Hegel was fully aware) – the patriarchal genealogical order as such dies; the Holy Spirit does not fit the family series, but introduces a post-paternal/familial community. In contrast to both Judaism and Christianity, the two other religions of the book, Islam excludes God from the domain of paternal logic: Allah is not a father, not even a symbolic one – God is one, he is neither born nor does he give birth to creatures. *There is no place for a Holy Family in Islam.* This is why Islam emphasizes so much the fact that Muhammad himself was an orphan; this is why, in Islam, God intervenes precisely at the moments of the suspension, withdrawal, failure, 'blacking-out', of the paternal function (when the mother or the child is abandoned or ignored by the biological father). What this means is that God remains thoroughly in the domain of the impossible-Real: he is the impossible-Real outside father, so that there is a 'genealogical desert between man and God'.[10] This was the problem with Islam for Freud, since his entire theory of religion is based on the parallel of God with father. Even more importantly, this inscribes politics into the very heart of Islam, since the 'genealogical desert' renders impossible the grounding of a community in the structures of parenthood or other blood-links: 'the desert between God and Father is the place where the political institutes itself'.[11] With Islam, it is no longer possible to ground a community in the mode of *Totem and Taboo*, through the murder of the father and the ensuing guilt bringing brothers together – thence Islam's unexpected actuality. This problem is in the very heart of the (in)famous *umma*, the Muslim 'community of believers'; it accounts for the overlapping of the religious and the political (the community should be grounded directly in God's word), as well as for the fact that Islam is 'at its best' when it grounds the formation of a community 'out of nowhere', in the genealogical desert, as the egalitarian revolutionary fraternity. No wonder Islam succeeds when young men find themselves deprived of a traditional family safety network. This properly political dimension survives in Shia communities much more than in the Sunni majority – Khomeini stated clearly that Islam can not only ground a true politics, but that 'the foundation of Islam is in

10 Fethi Benslama, *La psychanalyse a l'epreuve de l'Islam* (Paris: Aubier, 2002), p. 320.
11 Ibid.

politics': 'The religion of Islam is a political religion; it is a religion in which everything is politics, including its acts of devotion and worship.' Here is his most succinct formulation: 'Islam is politics or it is nothing.'[12]

Buden quotes Živko Kastić, a Croat Catholic-nationalist priest who declared that Catholicism is 'a sign that you are not ready to renounce your national and cultural heritage – the integral, traditional Croat being'.[13] What this quote makes clear is that what is at stake is no longer the question of belief, of its authenticity, but of a politico-cultural project. Religion is here just an instrument and sign of our collective identity, of how much public space 'our' side controls, of asserting 'our' hegemony. That is why Kastić quotes approvingly an Italian communist who said 'Io sono cattolico ateizzato'; it is why Breivik, also an atheist, refers to the Christian legacy that grounds European identity – or, to quote Buden again: 'Belief appears now as culture, in its difference to another culture – either the culture of another confession or the culture of atheism in its modernist forms.'[14] One can see clearly how religious fundamentalists, who otherwise despise cultural relativism and historicism, already function within its horizon: 'The space of difference became now something exclusively cultural. In order for us to perceive political differences and divisions and to recognize them as such, they should first be translated into the language of culture and declare themselves as cultural identities ... Culture thus became the ultimate horizon of historical experience.'[15]

Does this mean that there is no way out of the global capitalist universe? The bleak picture of the total triumph of a global capitalism that immediately appropriates all attempts to subvert it is itself the product of ideological imagination. It makes us blind to the signs of the New which abound in the very heart of global capitalism. For example, in his *The Zero Marginal Cost Society*, Jeremy Rifkin elaborates how, with the emerging Internet of Things, we are entering the era of nearly free goods and services: the rise of a global Collaborative Commons entails the eclipse of capitalism. There is a paradox at the heart of capitalism that has propelled it to greatness but is now taking it to its death: the inherent entrepreneurial dynamism of competitive markets that drives productivity up and marginal costs down, enabling businesses to reduce the price of their

12 Khomeini, 'Quotes'.
13 Buden, *Zone des Uebergangs*, p. 134.
14 Ibid., p. 111.
15 Ibid., p. 59.

goods and services in order to win over consumers and market share. (Marginal cost is the cost of producing additional units of a good or service, if fixed costs are not counted.) While economists have always welcomed a reduction in marginal cost, they never anticipated the possibility of a technological revolution that might bring marginal costs to near zero, making goods and services priceless, nearly free, and abundant, and no longer subject to market forces.

Now, a formidable new technology infrastructure is emerging with the potential of pushing large segments of economic life to near-zero marginal cost in the years ahead. The Communication Internet is converging with a nascent Energy Internet and Logistics Internet to create a new technology platform that connects everything and everyone. Billions of sensors are being attached to natural resources, production lines, the electricity grid, logistics networks, recycling flows, and implanted in homes, offices, stores, vehicles and even human beings, feeding Big Data into a global neural network. People can connect to the network and use Big Data, analytics and algorithms to accelerate efficiency, dramatically increase productivity, and lower the marginal cost of producing and sharing a wide range of products and services to near zero, just as they now do with information goods. This plummeting of marginal costs is spawning a hybrid economy, part capitalist market and part Collaborative Commons: people are making and sharing their own information, entertainment, green energy and 3D-printed products at near-zero marginal cost; they are sharing cars, homes, clothes and other items via social media sites, rentals, redistribution clubs and cooperatives at low or near-zero marginal cost; students are enrolling in free open online courses that operate at near-zero marginal cost; entrepreneurs are bypassing the banking establishment and using 'crowdfunding' to finance startup businesses, as well as creating alternative currencies in the fledgling sharing economy. In this new world, social capital is as important as financial capital, access trumps ownership, sustainability supersedes consumerism, cooperation ousts competition, and 'exchange value' in the capitalist marketplace is increasingly replaced by 'sharable value' in the Collaborative Commons. Capitalism will remain, but primarily as an aggregator of network services and solutions – a powerful niche player in the coming world beyond markets where we are learning how to live together in an increasingly interdependent global Collaborative Commons (a term that sounds like a clumsy translation of 'communism').

Here, however, we encounter one of the great antagonisms of our digital age: this very feature that sustains utopian hopes also sustains new forms of alienation. The catch resides in the infinitesimal temporal gap between the pure synchronicity of the worldwide web (we appear to be all simultaneously connected, so that it doesn't matter where we are located in physical reality) and the minimal temporality that remains as a trace of the materiality of the worldwide web. This minimal gap is mobilized by the high-frequency traders (HFTs) to earn billions, as was exposed by Michael Lewis in *Flash Boys*.[16] Using fibre-optic cables that link superfast computers to brokers, HFTs intercept and buy orders, sell the shares back to the buyer at a higher price, and pocket the margin. Here, then, is how it works from the standpoint of a broker buying stocks: he sits in front of a screen, sees an offer he considers acceptable, presses the YES button, and the deal is instantly concluded, albeit at a minimally higher price. What he doesn't know is that, in the milliseconds between his pressing YES and the conclusion of the deal (which appeared to him instantaneous), the HFT's computer (operating on a special algorithm) detected his YES, bought itself the stock for the offered price, and then sold it back to him for a slightly higher price – in a gap of time so small that the whole operation goes unnoticed. This is why HFTs secretly built an 827-mile cable running through mountains and under rivers from Chicago to New Jersey: it reduces the journey-time of data from seventeen to thirteen milliseconds; there is also a transatlantic cable still under construction that will give a 5.2-millisecond advantage to those looking to profit from trade between New York and London.

After the book was launched, several regulatory agencies took action: the Justice Department, the FBI, the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority had been investigating HFT firms and exchanges for violations of insider trading and other Wall Street rules. Why such an outcry, when receiving trading data a few milliseconds ahead of someone else – which is the *raison d'être* of HFT – is technically not illegal? The reason is obvious: what HFTs are doing is proof that the stock market is being rigged in favour of front-running traders, and that other players are being screwed for having slower connections, so that the all-important image of the stock market as open and transparent is ruined. But there is another reason. The HFT scandal is only the latest evidence that the stock market's clubby insiders

16 I rely here on Andrew Ross's review of *Flash Boys* in the *Guardian* (16 May 2014).

have always enjoyed the advantage of getting better and faster information. Yet the fiction of equal access is necessary to draw the punters into the casino, and to ensure that the market escapes the fate of being heavily regulated. Books like Matt Taibbi's *The Divide* attracted much less attention than Lewis's, although Taibbi fully details the record of bankers' malfeasance and extortion: predatory lenders, crooked collection agents, illegal foreclosures, PPI rip-offs and other swindles that are considered business as usual by the finance industry – so that, as Andrew Ross put it succinctly, the dupes in Lewis's story are the Wall Street brokers and hedge-fund managers who were outrun by the flash boys. In Taibbi's book, the victims are the rest of us. Focusing on HFTs thus brings forward a marginal phenomenon that appears as a specific distortion, thereby allowing us to adhere to the myth that the market is in itself a balanced and open mechanism.

But there is yet a third, more fundamental – even 'metaphysical' – reason. Franco Berardi located the origin of today's uneasiness and impotence about the exploding speed of the functioning of the big Other (the symbolic substance of our lives) and the slowness of human reactivity (due to culture, corporeality, disease, and so on): '[T]he long-lasting neoliberal rule has eroded the cultural bases of social civilization, which was the progressive core of modernity. And this is irreversible. We have to face it.'[17] Are HFTs not an exemplary case of how our brains, our mental abilities, are no longer synchronous with the functioning of the social-symbolic system? What happens in those milliseconds is simply beyond the scope of our normal perception. Agents don't know what goes on, primarily not because of the immense complexity of the process, but because what gets enacted there is a kind of minimal self-reflexivity: my own act (my reaction to the offer, my pressing YES) is inscribed, taken into account, in what I perceive as the state of things (the price I pay) – I decide (to buy), and my decision changes the price of what I buy. Furthermore, far from relying on some kind of mysterious synchronicity, the HFTs' operation mobilizes precisely the minimal gap between the virtual digital space and its material embodiment: our spontaneous illusion, while we surf on the web, is that we are in the domain of pure synchronicity, where contact between all participants is direct – as the saying goes, when I communicate on the web, it doesn't matter where I am; my partner can sit in the next room or stand on some Himalayan

17 Franco Bifo Berardi, *After the Future* (Oakland, CA: AK, 2011), p. 177.

iceberg. The HFTs' operation demonstrates that it *does* matter where I am – it is a kind of revenge of materialism against the spontaneous idealist illusion that pertains to the digital space.

Effectively, there is a kind of twisted emancipatory potential in what HFTs are doing: to quote Marx, what happens in their operation is a minimal 'expropriation of the expropriators' (stock-market speculators, rich investors . . .) themselves, who are getting their comeuppance. Perhaps *this* is why *Flash Boys* created such a fuss. With HFTs, financial speculation reaches its meaningless pinnacle, bringing out the nonsense that sustains the entire edifice of financial speculations; in this sense, one can say that HFTs are too bright for their own good. The German weekly magazine *Der Spiegel* reported, among the greatest recorded stupidities and blunders of 1998, the case of a German robber who grabbed an old woman's purse while she was taking a photo of herself in an automatic photo booth at a railway station. However, unfortunately for him, one of the usual four photos was taken at exactly the moment he leaned in to snatch the purse, so that his face and hand were clearly discernible on the photo, delivering to the police the direct proof of the crime plus who committed it . . . Isn't it something similar that we encounter with HFTs? Do we not see there the direct proof of how the crime is committed?

But there is an even deeper and properly uncanny dimension in what HFTs are doing. The way they demonstrate how markets are rigged points towards a more fundamental ontological deadlock in which (what we experience as) *reality itself is 'rigged'*, in the sense that we don't perceive it 'objectively' since our act is already inscribed into what we perceive. It is thus as if HFTs do not simply operate in our reality, but intervene into the very mechanism of how we perceive/constitute (what we experience as) reality: the most spontaneous link between action and reaction (I press the YES button on a deal, the deal is immediately confirmed) is already manipulated. And does quantum physics not entertain the same 'riggedness' of reality itself? At its most daring, it seems to allow the momentary suspension, of 'forgetting', of the knowledge in the real. Imagine that you have to take a flight on day x to pick up a fortune the next day, but do not have the money to buy the ticket; but then you discover that the accounting system of the airline is such that if you wire the ticket payment within twenty-four hours of arrival at your destination, no one will ever know it was not paid prior to departure. In a homologous way,

> the energy a particle has can wildly fluctuate so long as this fluctuation is over a short enough time scale. So, just as the accounting system of the airline 'allows' you to 'borrow' the money for a plane ticket provided you pay it back quickly enough, quantum mechanics allows a particle to 'borrow' energy so long it can relinquish it within a time frame determined by Heisenberg's uncertainty principle . . . But quantum mechanics forces us to take the analogy one important step further. Imagine someone who is a compulsive borrower and goes from friend to friend asking for money . . . Borrow and return, borrow and return – over and over again with unflagging intensity he takes in money only to give it back in short order . . . a similar frantic shifting back and forth of energy and momentum is occurring perpetually in the universe of microscopic distance and time intervals.[18]

This is how, even in an empty region of space, a particle emerges out of Nothing, 'borrowing' its energy from the future and paying for it (with its annihilation) before the system notices this borrowing. The whole network can function like this, in a rhythm of borrowing and annihilation, one borrowing from the other, displacing the debt onto the other, postponing the payment of the debt. It is really as if the subparticle domain is playing Wall Street games with futures. What this presupposes is a minimal gap between things in their immediate brute reality and the registration of this reality in some medium (of the big Other): one can cheat insofar as the second is delayed with regard to the first. So, as with HFTs, reality itself (the way we perceive it) is 'rigged' because of things taking place in the imperceptible interstices of time.

This 'riggedness' is not just an ideological blindness; it is grounded in the very material organization of production. Precarious work, which plays a more and more important role in our societies, deprives the worker of a whole series of rights which, until recently, were taken as self-evident in any country that perceived itself as a welfare state: workers have to take care themselves of their health insurance and retirement options; there is no paid leave; the future becomes much more uncertain; precarious work generates an antagonism within the working class between permanently employed and precarious workers (trade unions often tend to privilege permanent workers; it is very difficult for precarious workers even to organize themselves into a union, or establish any other form of

18 Brian Greene, *The Elegant Universe* (New York: Norton, 1999), pp. 116–19.

collective self-organization). One would have expected that this strengthened exploitation would also strengthen workers' resistance, but it renders resistance even more difficult, and the main reason for this is ideological: precarious work is presented (and up to a point even effectively experienced) as a new form of freedom: I am no longer just a cog in a complex enterprise, but an entrepreneur-of-the-self; I am a boss of myself who freely manages his/her employment, free to choose new options, to explore different aspects of my creative potentials, to choose my priorities . . .

There is a clear homology between the precarious worker and today's typical consumer of TV and cultural programmes, where we are also as it were ordained to practise freedom of choice:[19] more and more, each of us is becoming the curator of his/her own TV and cultural life, subscribing to programmes we prefer (HBO, History Channel . . .), selecting movies on demand, and so on, according to our own taste, exposed to a freedom of choice for which we are not really qualified, since we are given no orientation, no criteria, and are thus left to the arbitrariness of our bad taste. The role of authorities, models, canons even, is essential here: even when we aim at violating and overturning them, they provide the basic coordinates (orientation points) in the messy landscape of endless choices. In such a totally non-transparent situation, the only way out is often a blind explosion of violence. *Rolling Stone* magazine recently drew the conclusion that imposes itself after the Ferguson incident:

> Nobody's willing to say it yet. But after Ferguson, and especially after the Eric Garner case that exploded in New York after yet another non-indictment following a minority death-in-custody, the police suddenly have a legitimacy problem in this country. Law-enforcement resources are now distributed so unevenly, and justice is being administered with such brazen inconsistency, that people everywhere are going to start questioning the basic political authority of law enforcement.[20]

In such a situation, when the police are no longer perceived as the agent of law, of the legal order, but as just another violent social agent, protests against the predominant social order also tend to take a different turn – that of exploding abstract negativity. When, in *Group Psychology*, Freud

19 I rely here on the work of Jela Krečič.
20 Matt Taibbi, 'The Police in America Are Becoming Illegitimate', *Rolling Stone*, 5 December 2014.

describes the 'negativity' of untying social ties (Thanatos as opposed to Eros, the force of the social link), he all too easily dismissed the manifestations of this untying as the fanaticism of the 'spontaneous' crowd (as opposed to artificial crowds: the Church and Army). Against Freud, we should retain the ambiguity of this movement of untying: it is a zero-level that opens up the space for political intervention. In other words, this untying is the pre-political condition of politics, and, with regard to it, every political intervention proper already goes 'one step too far', committing itself to a new project (or Master-Signifier). Today, this apparently abstract topic is relevant once again: the 'untying' energy is largely monopolized by the New Right (the Tea Party movement in the United States, where the Republican Party is increasingly split between Order and its Untying). However, here also, every fascism is a sign of failed revolution, and the only way to combat this rightist untying will be for the left to engage in its own untying – and there are already signs of it (the large demonstrations all around Europe in 2010, from Greece to France and the UK, where the student demonstrations against university fees unexpectedly turned violent). In asserting the threat of 'abstract negativity' to the existing order as a permanent feature that can never be *aufgehoben*, Hegel is here more materialist than Marx: in his theory of war (and of madness), he is aware of the repetitive return of the 'abstract negativity' which violently unbinds social links. Marx re-binds violence into the process out of which a New Order arises (violence as the 'midwife' of a new society), while in Hegel, the unbinding remains non-sublated.

One of the names of this 'abstract negativity' is the 'divine violence' about which Walter Benjamin wrote. In August 2014, violent protests exploded in Ferguson, a suburb of St Louis, Missouri, after a policeman shot to death an unarmed black teenager suspected of robbery: for days, police tried to disperse mostly black protesters. Although the details of the accident are murky, the poor black majority of the town took it as yet another proof of the systematic police violence against them. In the US slums and ghettos, the police effectively function more and more as a force of occupation – something akin to Israeli patrols entering the Palestinian territories on the West Bank. The media were surprised to discover that even their guns are increasingly those used by the US army. Even when police units try just to impose peace, distribute humanitarian help or organize medical measures, their modus operandi is that of controlling a foreign population. Are such 'irrational' violent demonstrations with no concrete programmatic demands, sustained by just a vague call for justice, not today's exemplary cases of divine violence? They are, as Benjamin put it, means without ends, not part of a long-term strategy.

The immediate counter-argument is this: But are such violent demonstrations not often unjust? Do they not hit the innocent? If we are to avoid the overstretched politically correct explanations according to which the victims of divine violence should humbly not resist it on account of their generic historical responsibility, the only solution is simply to accept the fact that divine violence *is* brutally unjust: it is often something terrifying, not a sublime intervention of divine goodness and justice.

A left-liberal friend from the University of Chicago told me of his sad experience. When his son reached high school age, he enrolled him into a school north of the campus, close to a black ghetto, with a majority of black kids. But his son then began returning home almost regularly with bruises or broken teeth – so what should he have done? Put his son into another school with the white majority, or let him stay? The point is that this dilemma is wrong: the dilemma cannot be solved at this level, since the very gap between private interest (safety of my son) and global justice bears witness to a situation which has to be overcome.

If it is to survive, the radical left should thus rethink the basic premises of its activity. We should dismiss not only the two main forms of twentieth-century state socialism (the social-democratic welfare state and the Stalinist party dictatorship) but also the very standard by means of which the radical left usually measures the failure of the first two: the libertarian vision of communism as association, multitude, councils, anti-representationist direct democracy based on citizens' permanent engagement. This perspective is unacceptable for our ordinary democratic stance. No wonder that, in a CUNY debate with Fredric Jameson, Stanley Aronowitz desperately tried to reduce Jameson's utopian idea of universal conscription back to the anti-representationist direct democracy in which people (soldiers) organize themselves in councils, as they do in rebellious people's armies. Such direct democracy is the extreme point of the politicization of the entire society, while Jameson repeatedly emphasizes that his idea of universal conscription aims at the disappearance of the political dimension as such: all that remains in Jameson's utopian society is a militarily (i.e. non-politically) organized economy with no need for the permanent engagement of the people, and the immense – also non-political – domain of cultural pleasures, from sex to art. (The truth we have to embrace is that, if we want to move away from representation towards direct democracy, this direct democracy has always to be supplemented with the

non-representational higher power, say, of an 'authoritarian' leader – in Venezuela, Chavez's leadership was the necessary obverse of his attempts to mobilize direct democracy in the *favelas*.)

Berardi warns us against what he calls the Deleuzian 'gospel of hyper-dynamic deterritorialization'. For him, if we are not able to step outside the compulsion of the system, the gap between the frantic dynamics imposed by the system and our corporeal and cognitive limitations sooner or later brings about the fall into depression. Berardi makes this point apropos of Felix Guattari, his personal friend, who, in theory, preached the gospel of hyper-dynamic deterritorialization, while personally suffering long bouts of depression:

> Actually the problem of depression and of exhaustion is never elaborated in an explicit way by Guattari. I see here a crucial problem of the theory of desire: the denial of the problem of limits in the organic sphere . . . The notion of the 'body without organs' hints at the idea that the organism isn't something that you can define, that the organism is a process of exceeding, of going beyond a threshold, of 'becoming other.' This is a crucial point, but it's also a dangerous point . . . What body, what mind is going through transformation and becoming? Which invariant lies under the process of becoming other? If you want to answer this question you have to acknowledge death, finitude, and depression.[21]

Depression, finitude, exhaustion, and so on, are here not empirico-psychological categories, but indications of a basic ontological limitation. When Berardi talks of depression, it is with regard to interpellation proper – i.e. a reaction of the human animal to the Cause which addresses us, specifically with regard to late-capitalist interpellation, but *also* with regard to emancipatory mobilization. The critique of political representation as a passivizing alienation (instead of allowing others to speak for them, people should directly organize themselves into associations) here reaches its limit: the idea of organizing society in its entirety as a network of associations is a utopia that obfuscates a triple impossibility:[22]

1. There are numerous cases in which representing (speaking for) others is a necessity; it is cynical to say that victims of mass violence from Auschwitz to Rwanda (and the mentally ill, children, and so on, not to mention suffering animals) should organize themselves and speak for themselves.

2. When we achieve a mass mobilization of hundreds of thousands of people self-organizing horizontally (Tahrir Square, Gezi Park . . .), we should never forget that they remain a minority, and that the silent majority remains outside, non-represented. (This is why, in Egypt, this silent majority defeated the Tahrir square crowd and elected the Muslim Brotherhood.)

3. Permanent political engagement has a limited time-span: after a couple of weeks or, rarely, months, the majority disengages, and the problem is to safeguard the results of the uprising at this moment, when things return to normal.

There is, of course, much to say against political representation. On 1 October 2014, David Cameron made a famous Freudian slip at the Conservative Party conference: enumerating the poor and dispossessed, he concluded with 'this is who we resent' (instead of 'represent'), thereby echoing the famous dialogue from *Citizen Kane* in which Kane is attacked by a rich banker for speaking for the poor in his media, and replies: 'Would you prefer the poor to speak for themselves?' So does the acceptance of representation imply a resigned surrender to the hegemonic power structure? No – there is nothing inherently 'conservative' in being tired of the usual radical leftist demands for permanent mobilization and active participation, demands that follow the superego logic – the more we obey them, the more we are guilty . . . The battle has to be won *here*, in the domain of citizens' passivity, when things return back to normal the morning after ecstatic revolts: it is (relatively) easy to have a big ecstatic spectacle of sublime unity, but how will ordinary people feel the difference in their ordinary daily lives? No wonder conservatives like to see from time to time sublime explosions – they remind people that nothing can really change, that the next day things return to normal.

21 Berardi, *After the Future*, pp. 177–8.

22 I rely here on Rowan Williams's 'On Representation', presented at the colloquium 'The Actuality of the Theologico-Political', Birkbeck School of Law, London, 24 May 2014.