

# Celebrity Come Communism

'On the Idea of Communism', Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, London, 13–15 March 2009

**T**his conference's political conditions had been staked out in advance, on behalf of all the speakers, by Alain Badiou's essay 'The Communist Hypothesis'. These were the collapse of the Old Left of the Communist Party and state, and the demise of the social-democratic project. The financial crisis that has since intervened featured as an additional element and a frequent point of reference for speakers and audience. But if, as a result of the apparent ideological capitulation of free-market capitalism, 'we are [supposedly] all socialists now', then the imperative for communism to further distance itself from the Party, the generalities of the Left, and even from socialism itself as a continuation of the capitalist project, marks the latest high-water mark of a pessimistic position.

In this respect, the current situation is resolutely modern and represents not the stalling of capitalism but the obverse face of a triumphant capitalist Third Way over an already outdated model of free-market economics. Those participants of the conference who urged the speakers to find something optimistic in re-nationalization or government-backed co-operative schemes were offered little other than sympathetic platitudes. At one point Slavoj Žižek invoked Naomi Klein's shock doctrine thesis with reference to the Cultural Revolution, but the current crisis has already proved to be an opportunity for further consolidations of the newest forms of capitalist organization and power.

These actual political conditions imposed certain rhetorical constraints upon Badiou and the other participants, a collection of predominantly European thinkers whose combined celebrity status had ensured the event was both well publicized and extremely well attended. (The location had to be changed twice to accommodate the audience of nine hundred.) It also imposed specific constraints upon the possibility of what they continued to identify as 'the Communist Hypothesis', even as the elasticity of the concept was tested to its limit. It was not merely the rejection of the state, in both its capitalist and socialist forms, that was demanded by many, but even the assumption that, as Žižek remarked, history is on our side. As a number of speakers emphasized, Marx's theorization of history as the history of class struggle is not itself a communist or even necessarily a radical proposition.

Badiou's summation that our political problems are closer to those of the nineteenth century than to the twentieth reflected the philosophical retreat of some of the speakers back to the emancipatory

**'It's just the simple thing that's hard, so hard to do'**

### **Gender trouble at the Birkbeck Boys' Institute for the Humanities**

The BIH, or Boys' Institute for the Humanities, as the Birkbeck Institute is widely known, has had a coming of age – that is to say, gender. Long-simmering complaints in the College over the apparent inability of the Institute's directors (Žižek and Douzinas) to think of women who might have something to contribute to its extensive programming finally boiled over when the Club's international division (Žižekian) could muster only one female speaker among the thirteen it advertised for 'On the Idea of Communism'. Given the publicity surrounding the event, and the already-existing disquiet about the conference organizers' proud declaration of unanimity among all the speakers, in advance, on one 'precise and strong thesis', this was finally something that the Institute's steering committee could no longer ignore.

It agreed to set guidelines for organizers of future events requiring them to ensure that speaker lists do not 'over-represent' any particular group. No sooner said than undone: the Institute then went on to advertise a debate on Cosmopolitanism (for the weekend

humanism of the early 1840s. Here they sought to find a solid ground from which to think alternative trajectories for the 'Communist Hypothesis' than that of twentieth-century 'Marxism' with its supposed attendant 'Hegelianism'. For the socialism that Marx diagnosed in the *Paris Manuscripts* as 'crude communism' can no longer even be regarded as a stage of transition towards the true communist end. In Žižek's case this necessitated distinguishing the 'Haitian Hegel' (as invoked in Susan Buck-Morss's recent work) from the 'Japanese Hegel' identified with 'capitalism with Asian values'. However, none of the other speakers dared, as Terry Eagleton remarked, to do anything so embarrassing as to talk about Hegel.

The trajectories opened up for a nominalist concept of communism by these retreats may be schematized as follows: (1) a focus on voluntarism and self-organization in the emergence of new political subjectivities; (2) a rethinking of proletarianization in accordance with new analysis of class contradictions; (3) a call for philosophical critique as a political orientation in response to depoliticization. The questions and concerns raised by such positions are well rehearsed, but worth repeating. At stake is the capacity to theorize socio-political change without resorting to a bourgeois concept of freedom.

### Jacobinism

Speaking in the last session of the conference, Judith Balso reiterated the Badiouian need for a separation of politics and philosophy in order to create the space for a new place of thought, distanced from the state. However, whilst invoking the possibility for new political categories and names to be produced on their own terms out of such space, including that

prior to the Communism event) without a single woman speaker, leaving the director scrambling around for excuses, about how precipitate publication of the programme (ten days before the event) had given the impression that there were no women speakers, when there was actually to be... one more added to the publicity.

This is not just an institutional issue for Birkbeck, of course, but a symptom of the political culture surrounding the Žižek-Badiou 'Gang of Two', for whom the whole thirty-year period of the New Left must be travestied and its political gains forgotten (feminism, anyone?) – especially within the Left itself – in order to clear the ground for the 'return to reason' represented by the latest French philosophico-political vanguard.

Institutional anxiety about the event was intensified when the combination of its success at attracting an audience and its pricing policy (£100 and £45 for students) placed the Idea of Communism in danger of looking like it was even more in tune with the times than it realized: to wit, a cynical and hypercritical financial scam. But when a group of students gave advance warning of interrupting proceedings they were quickly bought off with the promise of a free live video room and a little platform time.

By the time the day arrived, an alternative, 'updated' programme had been composed (it is said by students at SOAS). This sprinkled women speakers in among the boys throughout and replaced Badiou's

of 'communism', her discussion failed to articulate the philosophical contours of such thinking, or how it might reconnect to any real social efficacy. On the middle day, Alessandro Russo had given more determination to such a perspective by suggesting that the name 'communism' is itself philosophy's political precondition, which places it outside of the depoliticization of present historical conditions. Mirroring Balso's call for a new relationship between politics and philosophy, Russo nonetheless emphasized the importance of a philosophical account of the emergence of subjective singularities that can be coupled with a critical examination of the materiality of the state. But the political remained for him, following Badiou, a rare and intermittent mode of subjectivity, manifest in discrete epochal sequences. He analysed such singular forms of political knowledge with reference to the Red Guard of the Cultural Revolution, as a form of extra-state organization that rendered the notion of class ambiguous.

Where Russo sought to analyse the historical emergence of such political subjectivities, Peter Hallward spoke in the opening session of the danger of abstraction and the need for what he called a Jacobin solution of voluntary self-determination through the will. Conceding the philosophical difficulty of invoking voluntarism and a coherent concept of the will, he nevertheless pressed for a re-engagement with collective politics, turning to Rousseau's conception of the general will as his source.



Although Hallward did not call upon it, there is a precedent for such a move within Marx, who evokes Rousseau in the conclusion to his essay 'On the Jewish Question' to emphasize the need for a fully *social* and not merely political form of emancipation. But the truly *general* will acquires its universal character for Marx in this period because its suffering is that of *wrong in general*, and only the proletariat as a class represents such a general wrong. The impasse that Hallward's spontaneous action must confront and overcome is thus still that of the proletariat in this sense of Marx's from 1843.

The revolutionary milieu of Robespierre and the Jacobins focused on by Hallward is characterized by Marx as a *classical* period of political understanding, whose faith in the omnipotence of the will reduces it to a wholly political principle. Lacking an understanding of the nature of the proletariat, the French insurrections were wasted in a senseless drowning in blood, Marx argued. For all the attractiveness of reclaiming the concepts of political subjectivity and collective action, it thus still needs to be explained how such a will can embody the universal or human one in the absence of some equivalent concept to this kind of 'proletarian' class, and consequently how such resistance represents a strictly *communist* hypothesis, rather than just an anti-capitalist one.

Jacques Rancière offered the most polemical opposition to the idea of waiting for the evolution of the proletariat, calling instead for a communist community of everyday life, which seemed to operate in the absence of any idea of communism. Speaking on the final day, he spoke of how emancipatory moments of collective disruption of the state fall outside the traditional category of class, bursting open the inherited idea of the political subject. That which exists after the

Introduction and Žižek's final remarks with talks by Stuart Hall and Sandra Harding, respectively; adding for good measure, Subcomandante Marcos on 'Intergalactic Decentralized Communism', a Skills Sharing Workshop on 'Alter-Communisms!' and a concluding 'Collective Trance: Channelling Karl Marx'. Jean-Luc Nancy, whose participation had been heralded as his being 'in attendance' throughout, but not speaking from the platform – in the end, he was unable to make it – was to be joined by Christine Delphy and 'members of migrant and feminist groups'.

Thus, for the first day, Angela Davis on 'Women, Race and Class', Lynne Segal on 'What Feminism Did to Communism' and Nancy Hartsock on 'The Proliferation of Radical Standpoints' interspersed themselves between Michael Hardt, Bruno Bosteels and Peter Hallward. At the conference itself, Hardt acknowledged at the outset of his talk that this would certainly have been a more interesting event. But he spoilt that a bit by then emphasizing, US-style, how much his thought owed to the women speakers on the 'fantasy' programme – sending some bemused listeners back for another look at the index of *Empire*.

Day two saw Silvia Federici and Vandana Shiva offering papers on 'Creating Communities of Care'

collapse of all other communities will be communism, he insisted, but we cannot recover this on the basis of the old communism.

Alberto Toscano's presentation on the previous day was a useful counterpart in this regard. In one of the most nuanced papers of the conference, Toscano suggested that the proletariat itself arises through economic and social association, in which both knowledge and the capacity for organizational power are prefigured. He fleshed out this notion by drawing on the early Marx's discussion of the benefits of philosophical advance under conditions of a political backwardness, developing this as a non-dogmatic form of abstraction, in contrast to the dogmatic abstraction of utopianism. 'Communism' then becomes an Idea, not in the Kantian sense of a metaphysical concept, but in the Deleuzian sense of a problem whose formulation exposes the conditions of its determination. But the step between worker association and proletarian power – between voluntarism and communist wills in Hallward's sense – requires further elucidation.

## Serfdom

In the opening paper of the conference, Michael Hardt turned from Lenin to Marx in order to return to the moment of transition from a still semi-feudal emphasis on immobile property (land) to the industrial capitalist dominance of mobile property (capital). Again, this economic transition is first documented in Marx's early manuscripts, and it was through an analysis of rent as a form of exploitation whose basis can be traced back to the expropriation of the commons through robbery that Hardt offered his own criticism of the current predominance of cognitive capital. This critique of contemporary political economy permitted Hardt to conceive of a new historical antagonism that reproduces a certain 'proletarianization' (perhaps, more accurately, a 'serfdom') of the immaterial labouring class. By reconnecting with the economy, Hardt was at least able to theorize the formation of class consciousness, absent from the voluntarist accounts.

Unsurprisingly, Antonio Negri ploughed a similar terrain – their new co-authored book on the commons, *Commonwealth*, is forthcoming. Negri spoke of communism taking shape with the emergence of a new proletarian subjectivity that reappropriates the commons from which it has been estranged. This metamorphosis 'from solitude to multitude' retains a specific class dimension, connecting it to the communist project described by Marx.

However, the emphasis in Hardt's and Negri's presentations upon primitive appropriation seemed to underestimate the interplay between mobile and immobile property, and the extent to which an immaterial form of the latter is still dependent upon material production outside the West, and the consumption of material commodities virtually embedded within immaterial spaces. If the resurgence of this immobile form of property represents not a transition *from* but a deepening and consolidation *of* capital, then the possibilities for emancipation would seem to become even more problematic. The history of private property is one of cunning and mystification. This makes it difficult to imagine that the commons can so easily be divested of new variations on those theological niceties that Marx attributed to the commodity, or of identity politics analogous to those of nation and state.

and 'Ecofeminism and the Challenge to Western Communism'; with Sheila Rowbotham teaming up with Huw Beynon to oppose Rancière's 'Communism without Communists?' with 'Communists without Communism', and Hilary and Steven Rose sympathizing, 'Alas Poor Marx'. (It was a characteristic feature of the conference itself that few of the speakers dwelt on Marx, to the puzzlement and annoyance of a large section of the audience. There is little room for Marx when Badiou is setting the agenda for unanimous agreement.)

The programme for the final day pitched Donna Haraway ('On Interspecies Communism') against Vattimo's 'Weak Communists', and bell hooks ('Ain't I a Communist?') against Badiou's Balso's Badiou masquerade, 'Communism: A Hypothesis for Philosophy, An Impossible Name for Politics?'

All of which leaves a question hanging in the air: who are the more imaginative political thinkers: Badiou, Žižek, Rancière, Negri and the rest, or the anonymous students of SOAS? It's not hard to imagine what even old Bertie Brecht would have answered to that.

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In contrast to Hardt and Negri, Žižek's 'To begin from the beginning over and over again' – a paper whose title was a better summation of his opponents' retreat than his own – proposed four possible sites of proletarianization based upon the antagonisms produced by liberal capitalist democracies: ecology, intellectual property, biopolitics and (most importantly) new forms of apartheid centred on categories of inclusion and exclusion. The last, he explained, typically seek to formulate a 'reasonable' racism or anti-immigrationism as an apologetic response to its 'unreasonable' forms.

Badiou had countered such a '[reasonable] fear of [unreasonable] fear' in his original 'Communist Hypothesis' essay by insisting on a single world, performatively united by living and acting human beings, undermining the globalized but internally divided market of things and signs. Žižek offered a less optimistic narrative, in which the worldlessness of capitalism would be negated in an epoch of catastrophic uncoupling from its traditional association with democracy, producing an authoritarian capitalism with 'Asian values' (presumably an ironic reference to 'reasonable racism'? ). But he offered no elaboration of how his four fields of antagonism might lead to genuine contradictions. Indeed, the need for such theoretical elaboration, emphasized in Žižek's opening address against the liberal injunction to act, was typically contradicted by his concluding exhortations towards a radical voluntarism and against the inactivity of waiting for a truly revolutionary class to emerge. Contrary to Rancière, however, Žižek insisted that the old idea of communism is still the best means to grasp what might be emerging today.

## Kantianism

Where Hallward, Rancière and others appealed to collective self-organization outside of class, and Negri, Hardt and Žižek attempted to theorize revolutionary activity through a radicalization of the idea of the proletariat, the simultaneous strength and weakness of Badiou's commitment to the 'Communist Hypothesis' lay, as ever, in his philosophy of the event. In his paper, Badiou presented the event as a revolutionary singularity capable of disrupting the dominant narrative of history, embodying a rupture in the normal dispositions of situations, and the creation of new possibilities that are not lying dormant inside the historical moment, but that call into question the 'progressive' tendencies of history.

Badiou has been accused of neo-Kantianism in the past. But there was little of the *neo-* in Badiou's paper, which in its philosophy of history remained resolutely *Kantian*. Indeed, at certain moments, he seemed to overshoot his self-identified retreat to the nineteenth century and wind up in the last decade of the eighteenth. Kant's description of the French Revolution as a historical sign, for example, was echoed in Badiou's appeal to the symbolic form possessed by concrete emancipatory events. Where Kant found the truth of the event in the enthusiasm of the watching world, Badiou spoke of the need to prepare and orient ourselves as individuals towards the event. What was revealed for Kant was an unforgettable cosmopolitan Idea; for Badiou, a demand to recover the Idea of communism. Badiou emphasized those discontinuous, subjective moments of rupture which permit us to speak of a 'Communist Idea' but *not* a communist theory. As a consequence, the political task becomes for Badiou a philosophical one: to think, in combination with our political experience, the condition of existence of the communist hypothesis.

In a return to the Althusserian origin, politics effectively becomes ideology critique. What for the early Marx was necessary under the historical conditions of German 'backwardness' becomes for Badiou a general condition of all political thought. According to this Platonic rather than Hegelian dialectic, we live not our future *history* in thought, but, in a Platonic sense, our future *truth*. Problems arose where, as in Kant, this segued into something more akin to practical reason. Here Badiou reconnected with the voluntarism promoted by Hallward and others, since he required a concept of freedom unconstrained by experience or history. However, this is to replace the negative and limited bourgeois concept of freedom with its positive and unconstrained opposite, without thereby overcoming its bourgeois social character.

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