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COMMUNISM AT BIRKBECK

Steven Shaviro

Conference Review: "On the Idea of Communism," Birkbeck College, 13–15 March 2009

The conference "On the Idea of Communism" took place at Birkbeck College, in the University of London, on 13–15 March 2009. There were twelve speakers, and nearly a thousand people in attendance. The conference, which was organized by Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, was intended, as Žižek said in his opening remarks, not to engage in discussion of actual political programs, or to intervene in the harsh realities of day-by-day social and political struggles, but to consider how the philosophical idea, or ideal, of communism might be revitalized and made useful in the twenty-first century. Žižek said that the time for guilt over the crimes of the twentieth century was over, and that today we need to reclaim the name of "communism" from the ill repute into which it has sunk. For my part, I think that this impulse is altogether correct. Many crimes were undoubtedly committed by Communist parties, or in the name of communism, throughout the twentieth century. But capitalism, too, is guilty of many crimes. And where communism has been thoroughly demonized, capitalism still refuses to acknowledge its own crimes or to show any repentance for them. Given the increasingly untenable situation in which we live today, exacerbated by the current financial disaster, communism may well be an idea whose time has finally come.

Of course, part of the appeal of events such as this conference is

simply that they give us an opportunity to see academic superstars in action. From this perspective, “On the Idea of Communism” did not disappoint. Slavoj Žižek was in fine form, manic and excited, and so full of a kind of outward-directed energy that I didn’t really mind his overbearingness. Gianni Vattimo, whom I had never seen before (and of whose works I have read only a little) was quite a charmer, in a humorously self-deprecating way. Terry Eagleton reveled in the role of the lone British commonsense empiricist in a room otherwise full of Continental dialecticians. Antonio Negri was warm and animated, while Jacques Rancière was admirably meditative. Alain Badiou served as a sort of *éminence grise*, dominating the proceedings as a central reference point even when he wasn’t on stage.

The main question that the conference raised for me was not “What is communism?” nor even “How can theory be tied to practice?” but rather “What does it mean to explore the mere idea of communism, as opposed to the actuality of capitalism?” The idea of communism is to a large extent a negative one in that we don’t really know what a communist society would be like; we can only say that it would mean the emancipation of people, and the establishment of forms of life that are repressed, oppressed, and denied an opportunity to flourish today. Terry Eagleton’s talk was the only one that endeavored to give

anything like a positive sense of what communism might be like, that tried to imagine it as an actual state of being rather than just as the negation of what we have today. For Eagleton, communism means abundance and leisure; it is much closer to the life of aristocrats (or, rather, to our imagination of aristocrats’ lives) than it is to anything like the oppressive actuality of working-class experience. He explained this sense of actual communism by quoting copiously from Shakespeare and other great canonical authors. The unintended effect of this “blast from the past” was to suggest, in a symptomatic way, the limitations of any attempts to imagine utopia. It didn’t really convince. I appreciated Eagleton’s citations of *The Tempest* in the same way that I appreciated other speakers’ invocations of Plato and Hegel, but, all in all, Eagleton seemed to me to be a bit too vague and too fussily “literary,” in an old-fashioned way; he spoke a bit too much as though it were still the “good old days,” when horrible things like movies and TV and the Internet didn’t yet exist.

Eagleton’s talk, together with the complete lack of speculation as to what communism might actually entail by the other speakers, left me convinced that “the idea of communism”—or what Alain Badiou, both in his own talk and in writings cited by others at the conference calls “the communist hypothesis”—is a utopian ideal, even

in the old-fashioned sense of the nineteenth-century "utopian socialism" that Marx rejected and mocked. At the very least, "communism" is the name for the only sort of utopianism available today that does not involve any religious or New Age ideas of perfectibility, redemption, and salvation. For communism is rather something much more down to earth. Communism has to do, pragmatically as well as etymologically, with a sense of "the common," as Michael Hardt argued in his impressive talk on the first day of the conference. In Hardt's view, the "common" is opposed both to private property and to the state property of twentieth-century "actually existing socialism." The common is neither "public" nor "private," but rejects both sides of this binary opposition. The common rather has to do with the fact that individual creativity is itself possible only in the context of all the linguistic, cultural, scientific, and technological heritage of humankind. As Newton famously said, he was only able to see further than others because he stood on the shoulders of giants. Today, more and more of our common heritage is being privatized, copyrighted, and patented by multinational corporations. Political struggle must involve taking back what is common to all of us. From this perspective, communism doesn't mean giving up on our inner lives, but creating an environment in which such lives might flourish. And, in

this humane sense, the idea of communism is not really a political notion, although politics is undoubtedly a large part of what might be needed to get there.

Hardt's discussion of communism and the common involved a focus on political economy and on the question of property. Hardt's frequent collaborator Antonio Negri had this emphasis, as well. But one of the things that surprised me the most overall about the conference was that so few of the other speakers had anything to say about what Marx called "the critique of political economy"—or, for that matter, about the current economic crisis (whose menace is certainly part of the reason that "the idea of communism" has become thinkable again or that so many people attended a conference like this). Now, I suppose that part of the reason for this avoidance of political economy is that the very point of "the idea of communism" is to imagine a society in which the current constraints of a capitalist political economy no longer apply. But this isn't much of an alibi when you consider that so many of the talks at the conference were, indeed, about the political strategies that might be used to get there from here.

For instance, Peter Hallward, with his usual lucidity and philosophical precision, developed a rather alarming call for Jacobin rigor and discipline in the defense of virtue. He expounded upon, explicated, and expanded Rousseau's

doctrine of the “general will.” However, Hallward failed to explain why such a reversion to the eighteenth century might provide resolutions to the questions of political organization that Marxists struggled with, and failed to resolve, for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He also failed to consider how revolutionary organizations analogous to the Jacobin clubs in 1790s France could arise in the first place in the contemporary world. Cut off from any pragmatic application, Hallward’s invocation of a politics of the will struck me as little more than a fantasmatic return to the bad old days of “party discipline” that any left-wing movement today would better do without.

At the other extreme from Hallward, a number of speakers—most notably, Badiou and Judith Balso—went on at great length about the necessity of struggles against the State; but they seemed to do this with little sense of how State apparatuses actually work to support and reinforce capital and finance. The dirty little secret of neoliberalism is that the “free market” could not actually function if the government were actually to observe a policy of *laissez-faire* and to leave “the market” alone. For it is only by rigid State control over things like the money supply, together with rigid enforcement of “property” laws (based on the absurd fiction that, say, the genetic makeup of genetically modified crops somehow had the same inviolable status

as my personal effects in my bedroom), that the crazed financial speculation of the last several decades could have happened in the first place. It is disheartening to hear people on the left denounce the State in the very same terms that the neoliberals hypocritically and misleadingly do.

The problem I have with leftist anti-State rhetoric was most usefully brought out by Bruno Bosteels, who pointed out how distinctly unhelpful such an attitude is when we have a situation such as that in Bolivia, where President Morales is specifically using the power of the State—as a result of his election to office by a large majority—to improve economic conditions for the vast masses, even at the expense of the wealthy and privileged. One might add that, in Bolivia as recently in Thailand and several other places, it is precisely the privileged bourgeoisie who have used the tactics of anti-State “people power,” with mass protests and civil disobedience, to bring down democratically elected majority governments who threatened their economically based privileges.

The problems that arise from an avoidance of any “critique of political economy” were particularly evident in the case of Alain Badiou’s talk. Not only did Badiou leave out political economy from his descriptions of how the revolutionary event might challenge the capitalist status quo; but also, when questioned on this score, he explicitly

denounced any attention to political economy as being the sin of "economism." Badiou argued that economics could only be part of "the situation" that it is the business of a new "truth," produced in a revolutionary event and by fidelity to that event, to disrupt. Badiou shows his Maoist pedigree in this insistence on politics as the ultimate ruling instance. Instead of engaging in the critique of political economy, and seeing the political as so intimately intertwined with the economic as to make any separation of them impossible, Badiou relegates economy, in a nearly Gnostic sort of way, to the realm of the irretrievably fallen. His notion of a pure politics (and a pure philosophy) unsullied by any contact with, or "contamination" by, the economic, is really the mirror image of today's neoclassical economics that imagines itself to be value neutral and apolitical. What this comes down to is that Badiou is a Maoist without the Marxism—a stance that I find rather terrifying.

At his best, Badiou is a kind of neo-Kantian. This is an appellation that he would undoubtedly reject, and one that most contemporary philosophers would find damning, though I mean it as a sort of praise. What I mean by Badiou's neo-Kantianism is that his whole notion of the transformative event, and of the ethics of remaining loyal to the event, is something like a late-modernist version of the categorical imperative. The event

is singular and yet of absolutely universal import—it commands our obedience, regardless of our merely personal, "pathological" inclinations. Badiou even defines the event, and the way we are called to be faithful to it, in entirely *formalist* terms—we are commanded by the very form of the event rather than by anything having to do with its specific content. This is an utterly Kantian way of thinking—and, unlike so many Hegelian commentators, I find this empty formalism to be a strength, rather than a weakness, of Kantian ethics. But I shudder when Badiou goes on to denature this Kantian impersonal universalism by turning it into a Pauline or Leninist or Maoist form of what Kant would have called fanaticism. Again, I am no Leninist or Maoist to begin with, but to take Leninism and Maoism and remove the Marxism from them, as Badiou does, really leaves us with nothing but a delusional hyperevolutionaryism and a romanticized reveling in the cleansing possibilities of terror.

All in all, the conference showcased the two major strains of European and North American theoretical approaches to communism today. On the one hand, there is the return to revolutionary fervor advocated by Žižek and Badiou. On the other hand, there is Hardt and Negri's vision of the "multitude" as a force against "empire." Žižek and Badiou insist upon the need for a "radical voluntarism"

to oppose the otherwise ubiquitous reign of capital. Hardt and Negri, to the contrary, see late capitalist globalization as, in effect, already creating the objective conditions for communism. The difference between these two visions echoes the dispute, which ran through all of twentieth-century Marxism, between vanguardists who sought for strategies to take power and those who believed that the logic of history would almost automatically lead from capitalism to socialism and then communism. In the twenty-first century, this opposition has become so sterile that we need somehow to get beyond it altogether. But this is something that nobody at the conference was able to offer.

In a conference so dominated by European and North American concerns, the rest of the world was noticeable by its absence. All the speakers were white Europeans or North Americans; in addition, eleven of the twelve speakers were men. The audience was more gender balanced than the panels, but it was also overwhelmingly white. This narrowness was quite deplorable. Žižek is well known for his criticism of what he sees as multicultural pieties in the Anglo-American academy, but, in this case, I would not allow him to get away with the claim that worries about the overwhelmingly white and male composition of the panels is just some irrelevant whining about representation. Rather, the

composition of the conference bespeaks a parochialism that “we” in the West have still only done a very poor job of breaking away from. Bruno Bosteels was the only one of the twelve speakers who talked a bit about contemporary Latin American (specifically Bolivian) experiences and theorizations of getting beyond capitalism. The Chinese Cultural Revolution was the explicit focus of Alessandro Russo’s talk, and a number of other speakers referred to it. But, all in all, the conference was far less internationalist than it ought to have been.

Žižek, speaking on the last day, gave what I am sure he would be happy for us to think of as a Hegelian synthesis of everything that went on during the conference. Unlike most of his colleagues, and in what might be thought of as a nod to Hardt and Negri, his analysis did include political economy. He listed four threats or challenges that we face today in our world of capitalism gone mad, and three of them, he acknowledged, fit under the rubric of Hardt and Negri’s notion of “affective” or “immaterial” production. These were (1) the threat of environmental disaster; (2) questions of so-called intellectual property, of copyright, patents, etc., and of the privatization of the common (understanding this in the broadest sense, as Hardt argued); and (3) questions of bioengineering, genetics, and the ability to manipulate our own genes and thus change “human nature” on a

biological and physiological level. Žižek added to these another challenge, which he said underlay all the others: (4) the question of inclusion and exclusion on a global level—as reflected in border controls, nationalisms, and the question of immigration (the countries of the North excluding people from the Global South, except insofar as their hyperexploitation was facilitated on the basis of admitting them with only a semilegal or illegal status). This last concern ties in with the whole question of *global slums*, as recently raised by Mike Davis. It also articulates the demands of capital that lie behind what Gilles Deleuze called the control society. And, finally, it gives a way of acknowledging the issues raised by postcolonial theory without falling into the multiculturalism that Žižek is not altogether without justification in criticizing.

Žižek argued that these questions could be resolved, in an anticapitalist direction, only by maintaining principles of egalitarianism and universalism. His example of this was the Haitian Revolution as the radicalization, or Hegelian completion, of the French Revolution. The French tried to repress the Haitians, which means that the French were not able to live up to their own universalism—they wouldn't apply this to black people. But the Haitians took the principles of the French Revolution more seriously than the French themselves did; they demanded and won independence,

against the French, on the basis of the very principles that the French had first enunciated. This is Žižek's way of splitting the difference between his inherent Eurocentrism and the fact that by his own principles of universality he needs to get away from Eurocentrism. In effect, he is privileging Europe on the grounds that Europe invented the very universalism that commands us to stop privileging Europe. As so often, I remain highly dubious of how this kind of Hegelian maneuver can be invoked any time Žižek needs to get out of a tight spot. It ends up being, to my mind, a little too easy and self-congratulatory a method of resolving the problem.

In any case, after laying all this out, Žižek went on to talk about some of the difficulties that we face in trying to deal with these questions. He was emphatic in arguing that the radicalness of communism needs to be upheld against the sort of reforms that—now that some of the excesses of finance are being at least slightly reined in—could come under the name of socialism (as in *Newsweek's* recent assertion that “we are all socialists now”). Such socialist reforms (including the nationalization of institutions like banks, or the de facto ownership of the majority of stock in troubled financial corporations by the U.S. government) would give an illusion of reform while really leaving the massive inequalities (between wealthy financiers and everyone else, and even more between the

citizens of Western nations and the overwhelming majority everywhere else in the world) largely untouched. I think that Žižek is right about this—the current crisis situation at least in principle makes radical alternatives more thinkable than they were during the Internet and real-estate bubbles—even though the recuperative efforts of Western governments today are almost entirely oriented toward keeping alive the sense that there is no alternative, even as the system (neoliberal capitalism) to which there is supposedly no alternative has collapsed and discredited itself.

In this light, Žižek talked of the difficulty of making any transgressive or oppositional gestures today because of the way that such gestures almost immediately get commodified and recuperated, and because the very ideas of transgression and radical innovation have themselves become capitalist resources, the mantras of every business school and every CEO. Žižek even quoted Brian Massumi to this effect, much to my surprise (since Massumi, like Hardt and Negri, is very much on the Deleuzian side, rather than the Lacanian one, of recent debates).

Awareness of these issues, I think, prevents Žižek from articulating groundless fantasies of revolutionary agency in the way that speakers like Hallward and Badiou did. Yet the only solution Žižek himself had to offer, in his talk, was an appeal to Badiou's transcendental

formulation of politics as fidelity to an event of radical rupture and of "communism" as the name of this event or rupture. During his talk, Žižek called several times for a "radical voluntarism"—though, when called on this formulation in the Q&A, he backpedaled (at least rhetorically) and said that all he meant by such a term was that, unlike the old Marxists of the earlier part of the past century, we could no longer believe today that the logic of history was on our side or that we could trust to the objective course of events to displace capitalism and create the necessary and sufficient conditions for communism.

I agree with Žižek on this—indeed, my largest disagreement with Hardt and Negri is precisely that they seem to affirm a soft version of the inevitable-movement-of-history or "objective conditions" thesis—but I think that a term like "radical voluntarism" works to insinuate a positive thesis—a sense of "what is to be done?"—that simply isn't there. Which leaves us back in our current condition: the demoralization of an impotent Left. I have no solution for this dilemma—and I don't think Žižek and Badiou (or Hardt and Negri either) have any more of a solution than I have. The problem is that these theorists are way too eager to adopt the rhetoric of seeming as though they do.

All this was symbolized, sadly, at the very end of the conference. As everyone was preparing to leave,

Žižek asked us to all stand up and sing the "Internationale." Almost nobody did—a few people in one corner were singing it but couldn't be heard above the general hubbub. In my case—and I suspect this held for a large majority of the hundreds of people in the auditorium—I would have liked to sing the "Internationale," but I couldn't—because, although I am vaguely familiar with the melody, I do not know the words.

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