

The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference

Zizek: Introduction

While the 2011 movements seem to have disappeared, dissatisfaction continues to simmer, new waves of revolts will follow. Global capitalism is the central antagonism.

1 - Badiou: The Communist Idea and the Question of Terror

Liberal propaganda, of course, argues that the natural bent of humans is to be competitive and unequal, and to own property, and so communism will always require state violence to force people into what is an unnatural condition. The terror of state socialism was inevitable. Internal to the logic of the project. Badiou is concerned to refute this propaganda. He wants to establish that there is no necessary relationship between terror (which he defines as the moment of the revolutionary process when the new state regime takes exceptional measures) and the communist Idea. Indeed, terror works against the flourishing of communism, because the key for communism is to *resolve* the internal problems within the people, but the terror just suppresses those problems, rather than working on them. He says this resolving of the internal problems within the people (or, "the correct handling of the contradictions among the people," p. 9) is the "real definition of democracy." The true essence of communism is not to destroy capitalism, it is not to compete with capitalism, to negate it--this drive is what results in terror. Communism's essence is to positively resolve the contradictions of the people, to create a new collective configuration under the sign of a shared idea. To create a new conception of work in line with a new vision of what life should be. We must start again from scratch.

Soviets thought all problems were urgent, that they had to be solved with violent, radical decisions. The Chinese experience was that victory could be attained by patient, long-term struggle.

2 - Balibar: Communism as Commitment, Imagination, and Politics

Communism is the effort to change the world and to change ourselves, emancipate ourselves collectively (create a new man). To create a new form of life. It is idealist: the idea of being in common. Subjects are created in relation to this idea. A new collective subject. Communists unthink the what-is and think the what-could-be.

Zizek: hard to revolutionize and order that revolutionizes itself. Struggle to control our enjoyment in an order that trades on helping us enjoy ourselves. Democracy is a master-signifier that leads us to obey in capitalism. What this (and Badiou's critique of capitalo-parliamentarianism) *does* offer is a clear statement that liberal-democracy is a tool of pacification in capitalism. The mistake they keep making is that they call liberal-democracy "democracy." Zizek is also partial to the Leninist revolution where conditions are not ripe, and he is enamored of the Terror.

Runs through (Hardt &) Negri. Exodus of labor from capitalism, creation of a new commons. They ignore the machine of repression that can capture this new exodus.

Communists do not form a party of their own, for Balibar. They are “de-organizing the organizations.” When they are effective they vanish in their own intervention.

“Badiou and Negri are in sharp disagreement” p. 21 --how?

Negri and Zizek have “a fundamental philosophical disagreement” p. 23 --how?

Zizek focuses on superstructure and ideology, pro-Hegel; Negri focuses on base and production, anti-Hegel.

[Very messy (even dashed off?) argument structure. Hard to follow. Useful mostly for its account of Badiou, Zizek, and Negri.]

3 - Bosteels: On the Christian Question

Highlights a piece by the Argentinian thinker Rozitchner that is a re-reading of “On the Jewish Question.” Religious alienation lies at the root of political and economic alienation. Man-God Public-Private Citizen-State. Submission to God; submission to Law. Explores the various forms our subjection and alienation takes (key to it is the terror of death), and the form of subjectivization that might counter this subjection and alienation and be emancipatory. For Rozitchner we must retrieve the potential for rebellion. We cannot turn to Christianity for such a theory of subjectivization. We need a political experience that would be essentially different from the one it combats. Different from the political theology of Christianity. Turning the power of the subject against the domination of a constituted subjectivity.

[Again a reference to Zizek’s fascination with the Terror.]

4 - Buck-Morss: A Communist Ethics

Don’t try to discover the ontological in politics. We can’t answer the question of being a priori, without actually being in the world. So there can’t be a communist ontology.

Our work is social, how can we make that fact about the world into something political? By a becoming-conscious of a common time-space-society.

Philosophy should not retreat from positivist science into the humanities (thought without empirical knowledge). Don’t seek an ontology of freedom, seek an empirical investigation of freedom’s surprising appearances in the world. A term means what it is being used as, not its etymology. Be attuned to the play of forces currently taking place. And pay attention to the *new*, the event, that emerges. Free communication/media is key. Ordinary people interrupting business as usual to act collectively. The capacity to act in common as the cornerstone of communist ethics. Look for emerging subjectivity, subjectivity being transformed. Perhaps mega-cities, massive proletarianization of rural workers, a potential for collective action. And intensification of inequality in the global North.

The eventual experiments going on need space and time to thrive.

[Another communist thinker allowing the word “democracy” to stand as = liberal democracy.]

5 - Dean: Communist Desire

More or less the same as Chapter 5 in *Communist Horizon*, so see that for notes...

6 - Johnston: From Scientific Socialism to Socialist Science...

Reintegrating an idea of nature into communism. [Relevant to the question of the non-human in democracy.] Life sciences emphasize the importance of emergent organization, spontaneous organization, and irreducibility and complexity (Levins, Lewontin, Rose). Biological agents are the nexus of a large number of weak forces (125ff). But then how can we act effectively to change the world? How could we have a revolutionary subjectivity? Avoid apologism for actually existing socialism. Idea in biology that the conditions necessary for something to emerge can be destroyed by the emergence of that thing [as with communism]. Badiou makes a "now famous" distinction between the materialist dialectic and *democratic materialism*. A market-ization of life and the life sciences. Ecosystem as market; people as independent agents shopping for the most rational outcome. A Hobbesian agents-in-competition view of life. Engels likes Hegel's emphasis on movement and relentless upheaval. Dialectical materialism in the life sciences. Question of subjectivity, of how we come into consciousness of ourselves. For Engels labor creates man as such. Recall Marx's argument that our species-being is laboring man. We struggle to live with/in nature, we are part of nature, but something in labor distinguishes us, the line of thought seems to go. We effect labor, but labor creates us too--we are the subject-object of labor. Materialist dialectics would then be the study of humans as self-transformative subject-objects [in relation with non-human agents]. In fact all organisms are-shaped-by-and-shape their environment. And speech--we are social/cooperative. We create divisions of labor [that may distinguish us].

Undermine the life sciences as a picture of Hobbesian agents-in-competition. Capitalism relies on this view. We must transform it from within. Into dialectical materialism. Revive the dialectics of nature, use cutting edge biology for the left, instead of letting biologists stand as apologists for a system beyond question. Don't ignore the hard sciences, capture them.

Pretty self-inflated/important in his discourse, but good point about the importance of capturing and embracing the natural sciences.]

7 - Ruda: Remembering the Impossible: For a Meta-Critical Anamnesis of Communism

Very much a follower (student?) of Badiou. Communism is non-statist and non-capitalist. Against Badiou's "democratic materialism," which has made communism seem unthinkable/impossible, we must *remember* (anamnesis) communism, make it seem thinkable/possible again. [This remembering is what "anamnesis" is.] An important part of communism is that it points to an eternal Idea. We live in an era that sees itself beyond the belief in anything eternal, anything absolute. We are all materialists now. Capitalism/democratic materialism reduces us to our bodies and to bare life without an idea. This lack of an idea creates indifference. We need materialism with an idea, and this can work against indifference. Plato's argument that we are reminded of an Idea of the Good that we already knew. Philosophy should remind us that communism has already become possible in the past, that we can do what seems beyond the bounds of the

possible. We need a new EPM, and new CM. Seems to be saying that this remembering can call forth an event, which creates a new possible, which causes a sudden change in the laws of the possible. We must be able to affirm this possible communism, the impossible possible of a singular-collective communist 'we', to affirm equality, to affirm our ability to change ourselves, affirm the possibility of emancipatory politics. We are able to produce eternal truths, because we already have. He calls for a dialectics of 1) dialectics and 2) non-dialectics (rather than totalizing dialectics). Dialectics draws conclusions, non-dialectics lets events emerge.

[Some awareness (fn 10) that the signifier "democracy" has been captured by capitalo-parliamentary democracy.]

[a whole lot of posturing going on here, performing his rightful place on the panel, displaying his philosophical chops. Not sure how much useful content there is. And in fact I suspect all the Badiou-Idea stuff is a dead end.]

8 - Terray: Communism Today

Quite anarchist in his imagination of communism. Religious-like faith in authority was problem of actually existing socialism. What about the state?

"The strategy of the Communist Parties, as we know, consisted of trying to *seize state power in order to then put it to use* as a lever for carrying out social transformation and securing the victory of the emancipation project. This strategy thus relies on the all-decisive hypothesis that *the state is an instrument adequate to this project* – and it is precisely on this point that we might question it. There can be no doubt that the state is an effective instrument for carrying out *certain* social transformations: in particular we might recall the role that it played in the period of primitive accumulation laying the ground for the advent of capitalist society. But when the transformation we have in mind is that of collective emancipation, the generalization of freedom and equality across all domains of social life, is the state still the appropriate tool? This is doubtful: by definition, the state is an authority separated from, exterior to, and above society; its very existence relies on the opposition between those who govern and those who are governed, between those who rule and those who are ruled.

Since communism must necessarily advance by way of the abolition of this opposition, we can say that there exists a *manifest contradiction between the goal pursued – communism – and the means employed – the state and the party that mirrors it.*" (p. 170)

Institutions do not let themselves disappear, and so the withering away of the state [after its seizure by the workers' party, anyway], is a dead end.

What about property? Any remaining private property? We should engage in collective appropriation, but how? Municipal property? Cooperative property? Some functions can remain with the (national?) state: energy, transport.

When we collectively appropriate property, we will need to plan the market, engage in intentional/conscious collective economic action. So we must democratize planning. Liberal democracy is a farce. We need new forms in all spheres. Decentralization and local control by cells. Workers' councils and

self-management.

In the communist society, conflict will remain: between order and chaos, between stasis and movement. The society will (use its own power to) collectively decide its own fate, but that does not mean that conflict will have disappeared.

9 - Zizek: Answers without Questions

Throughout he emphasizes the importance of not just rejecting the current order, but of building a new one 187. Move beyond mere protest, and figure out how to *impose a new reorganization* on all social life. For this *we need a strong body* able to act decisively. When people try to organize themselves, the most they can achieve is egalitarian space of debate. They cannot impose a new order, and so we need “something like” a party. The party is not that which holds all knowledge. It is, rather, the form the collective knowledge and will of the people takes. We all must work together to help determine the content of this collective knowledge and will. There is an open struggle among people themselves to define it (not a small vanguard of geniuses who defines it). He says, therefore, we should not abandon the party but engage it. [Of *course* we must work in community with others to define our collective will, but that community need not be a *party*, unless by ‘party’ you mean something so stretched that it is the same thing now as ‘the community.’] We must overcome the gap between people and the organized forms of their political agency. People must engage in an active struggle for the future of their party.

We require “concrete forms of direct social regulation of the process of production.” Actually-existing socialism lacked that. We need a “proper form of communist organization.” This is what we have to create on the day after the protests. What leaders, what organs, what to do? Avoid liberal democracy’s solutions. The art of politics is to insist on a demand that is realistic/feasible/legitimate but that disturbs the core of hegemonic ideology (i.e. appears impossible). We have plenty of anti-capitalism, but we are less good at seeing liberal-democracy as the enemy. Per Marx [OJQ?] we must fight in the private sphere, not the public. Uses Badiou to say that today the ultimate enemy is not capitalism, but democracy, by which they mean the liberal-democratic state. [Which they know is not the same thing as democracy, and yet, still, they persist in saying “democracy” when they mean “the liberal-democratic state masquerading as democracy.” Sigh.]

[Totally botches an analysis of the *indignados*. Based on ignorance.]

A whole raft of people around the world are being proletarianized, marginalized. For example, the UK riots can be seen as the reaction of the zero level of the capitalist subject...the pure competitive man seeking consumer goods, but in this case, those who cannot consume effectively in the present economy. For Zizek the problem was that the violence was self-destructive (reactive) rather than self-affirming (active). Or shantytown dwellers, or educated Europeans with no job prospects. This population must learn to act collectively. Intellectuals are not the vanguard, not the ones with the information. But the people are not either. People have the answers, but they need the intellectuals to help them with the questions.

A fair amount of economism and poo-pooing of non-class movements. If we focus on domination instead of exploitation, we will think recognition and inclusion

into liberal-**democracy** is the solution [e.g. gay marriage]. If we focus on exploitation as the problem, we will see **communism** as the solution 194. Anti-capitalism must be the ultimate aim, the horizon of all activity.

[Yet another one who lets “democracy” stand in for liberal-democratic bourgeois state. 194]