THE NEW COMMUNISM

Resurrecting the Utopian Delusion

Alan Johnson

A specter is haunting the academy—the specter of "new communism." A worldview recently the source of immense suffering and misery, and responsible for more deaths than fascism and Nazism, is mounting a comeback; a new form of left-wing totalitarianism that enjoys intellectual celebrity but aspires to political power.

The Slovenian cultural theorist Slavoj Zizek and the French philosopher and ex-Maoist Alain Badiou have become the leading proponents of this new school. Others associated with the project are the authors of the influential trilogy *Empire*, *Multitude*, *Commonwealth*, the American Michael Hardt of Duke University and the Italian Marxist Toni Negri; the Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo (who recently declared that he has positively "reevaluated" *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*); Bologna University professor and ex-Maoist Alessandro Russo; and the professor of poetry at the European Graduate School (and another ex-Maoist) Judith Balso. Other leading voices include Alberto Toscano, translator of Alain Badiou, a sociology lecturer at Goldsmiths in London, and a member of the editorial board of *Historical Materialism*; the literary critic and essayist Terry Eagleton; and Bruno Bosteels from Cornell University. Most spoke at "The Idea of Communism," a three-day conference held in London in 2009 that, to

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the astonishment of the organizers, attracted nearly a thousand people willing to pay more than one hundred pounds each. After that event, a companion publishing industry, powered by Verso Books, has grown up to accompany the movement, making it respectable on campuses. Among new communism's most important English-language texts, all published in the last few years, are *The Idea of Communism*, edited by Costas Douzinas and Zizek, Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis*, and Bosteels's *The Actuality of Communism*.

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Badiou's recent volume in particular, which Verso has designed as a little red book complete with a golden communist star on its cover, gives a flavor of the movement's thinking and aims. Co-founder of the militant French group Organisation Politique and now in his mid-seventies, Badiou reads the presence of communism in human history as the ongoing struggle for human emancipation rather than the series of disastrous detours it mostly was. From the French Republic of 1792 to the massacre of the Paris communards in 1871 and from 1917 to the collapse of Mao's Cultural Revolution in 1976—these are but two "sequences" of the communist "idea" in modern history, the first a time for the "setting in place of the communist hypothesis," the second an era of "preliminary attempts" at its "realization." The gaps between these "sequences" (including the last three and a half decades) Badiou classifies as time when the communist hypothesis is "declared to be untenable" and capital all-powerful. The "thrilling task" to which Badiou calls his readers, and to which a layer of intellectuals have rallied, is to "usher in the third era" of the communist idea.

So, why this new interest in communism, of all things? After all, the leading new communists have refused to plumb the gist of the historic failures of the past and freely admit that they have almost no idea how to proceed in the future. And in the present they are politically irrelevant. The appeal rests on one fact above all: only the new communists argue that

the crises of contemporary liberal capitalist societies—ecological degradation, financial turmoil, the loss of trust in the political class, exploding inequality—are *systemic*; interlinked, not amenable to legislative reform, and requiring "revolutionary" solutions.

Why does this idea appeal today? What can it actually mean, both theoretically and as a new form of radical politics in the twenty-first century? Do its evasions (of the communist record) and its repetitions (of the anti-democratic, authoritarian, and elitist assumptions of the old communism) define the new communism as yet another form of leftist totalitarianism?

The rehabilitation of communism has been "overdetermined," as the late French Marxist Louis Althusser would have put it. In other words, there has been a convergence of a series of apparently disparate but, in the eyes of the new communists, systemically related factors that has created a social emergency and the need for a kind of intellectual crisis management. First, and most obviously, the international financial crisis, the failure of the capitalist utopia after 1989, and the triumph of what Badiou calls an "utterly cynical capitalism." Second, the "return of history" after 2001 in the form of the failure of the so-called new world order and the emergence of seemingly viable authoritarian and collectivist alternatives to liberal democratic capitalism. Third, the post-1980s growth, especially in the US and UK, of what Robert Reich calls supercapitalism (intense competition, deregulation, globalization, financialization, the disappearance of job security, decline of labor unions, the erosion of the welfare state, and the attendant growth of extreme social inequalities, or what Zizek calls "new forms of apartheid, new walls, and slums"). Fourth, a growing external crisis in the form of ecological emergency. Fifth, a growing internal crisis in the form of "new enclosures"—i.e., the privatization and marketization of personal existence through the growth of biogenetics and new intellectual property norms. Sixth, a "hollowing out," as Badiou puts it, of representative democracy until all notions of government "for the people" let alone "by the people" become a poor joke.

Badiou establishes a systemic critique in *The Communist Hypothesis*, arguing that "political power, as the current economic crisis with its one single slogan of 'rescue the banks' clearly proves, is merely an agent of capitalism." Similarly, for Slavoj Zizek, "the link between democracy and

capitalism has been broken" and this rupture is the expression of "an inner necessity…in the very logic of today's capitalism."

If the financial crisis has cast doubt on an entire economic system, it is the crisis of the left that has created a *political* space for the new communism. Social democratic reformism is exhausted; across Europe and the Anglosphere, national versions of "Blairism" have everywhere turned the old people's parties into ideological rationalizers of a system that now mostly works only as a wrecking ball. These parties no longer take care of their own, argue the new communists. The only other form of leftism that has flourished after 1989 has also been revealed to be politically ineffectual: postmodern, theoreticist, and obsessed with oppression in culture, language, identity, and representation; uninterested in exploitation and political economy, in thrall to Foucauldian (often tenured) forms of "resistance," this literary and cultural "speculative leftism," it turns out, is no threat to capitalism. Indeed, much of the attraction to new communism comes from a yearning for a politics that is genuinely oppositional, positioned wholly outside the capitalist market and liberal democracy. Zizek sums up the pitch: "Do not be afraid, join us, come back! You've had your anti-communist fun, and you are pardoned for it—time to get serious once again."

But this is no mere exercise in nostalgia. The new communists dream of working out a new mode of existence of the communist "hypothesis" in the twenty-first century. They hope a new communist movement can grow out of the system's antagonisms. Zizek identifies four: "the looming threat of ecological catastrophe, the inappropriateness of the notion of private property for so-called 'intellectual property,' the socio-ethical implications of new techno-scientific developments (especially in biogenetics), and, last but not least, new forms of apartheid, new Walls [*sic*] and slums." The new communism is distinguished by refusing to treat these antagonisms in isolation, as technical problems amenable to parliamentary reform. For example, it rejects the idea that the ecological emergency is solvable by sustainable (capitalist) development, or that the hollowing out of representative democracy can be fixed by campaign finance reform. According to Zizek, it is because these antagonisms are expressions of the very structure of contemporary capitalism that they lend to the communist idea "a practical urgency."

Zizek argues that while the first three antagonisms are a "triple threat to our entire being," it is the fourth, the antagonism between the "exclud-

ed" and the "included," that is (quoting Marx) "the real movement that abolishes the present state of things." As the commons—of culture, of external nature, of internal nature—are privatized and enclosed, a process of near-limitless proletarianization sets in: the vast majority of people become "excluded from their own substance." Zizek thinks the new revolutionary agent will be grounded in the "revolutionary antagonism of the commons." The new communists did not coin the slogan "we are the ninety-nine percent," but when the Occupy activists are ready to listen, they'll find a theory that can generalize their practice.

Zizek told the protesters at Zuccotti Park in New York City that "the only way we are communist is that we care about the commons." The new communists seek to rehabilitate communism by treating it not as a historical movement with a record of labor camps and enormity but as a beautiful Platonic "Idea." The catastrophe of actually existing communism is acknowledged, but only as the first failed approximation to an obvious good. As Zizek puts it, "Try again, Fail again, Fail better."

As a capitalized "Idea" or an eternal "hypothesis," the new communism turns out to be a simple repetition of the old. The goal is the old dream of a leap into the kingdom of freedom—a society wholly beyond the market and representative democracy; a perfectly equal stateless society. For Badiou, class divisions, along with "capitalo-parliamentarism" will be "overcome," the division of labor "eliminated," the private appropriation of great wealth and its transmittance by inheritance will "disappear," and a coercive state, separate from civil society, will "wither away." New communism, then, is a kind of grand negation of all that is—for Bruno Bosteels, it is "an egalitarian discipline of anti-property, anti-hierarchy and anti-authority principles," while Badiou's desire is "a world that has been freed from the law of profit and private interest." And so on.

The communist idea or "hypothesis" is then placed beyond empirical refutation. "The eternal idea of the [Chinese] Cultural revolution survives its defeat in socio-historical reality," insists Zizek, while for Badiou, "failure is nothing more than the history of the proof of the hypothesis." Under scrutiny, it becomes clear that we are not dealing with a communist "hypothesis" at all—that would involve testing and the possibility of falsification—but rather a communist dogma, and the relation of the new

communists to that dogma is fundamentally religious, marked by piety and faith, and not at all critical.

The duty of the new communist is to "help a new modality of existence of the [communist] hypothesis to come into being," says Badiou. Likewise, uninterested in the purely theoretical, Alberto Toscano's desire is to "connect the prospects of communism to a partisan knowledge of the real and its tendencies." But they do not deliver. In fact they rarely rise above the merely gestural. For example, Jacques Rancière defines communism as "the autonomous growth of the space of the common created by the free association of men and women implementing the egalitarian principle."

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Badiou at least tries to explain this failure. He believes that communists, like everyone else on the left, remain the contemporaries of a fundamental strategic impasse revealed in May of 1968, when "the classical figure of the politics of emancipation was ineffective." And despite all the experimentation since with organizational forms, agents, and strategies, it is no clearer "what new forms of political organisation are needed to handle political antagonisms." In response to this strategic impasse, some new communists seek to "begin again at the beginning" by playing the role of underlaborer to the new practices of the new proletarians struggling against the new antagonisms: "As soon as mass action opposes state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice, rudiments or fragments of the hypothesis start to appear," writes Badiou, who also talks of "organising new types of political processes among the poor and working masses." Others do not even reach the level of vagueness. Instead they resolve the strategic impasse by mere rhetoric. Gianni Vattimo sees a communist future in "an undisciplined social practice which shares with anarchism the refusal to formulate a system, a constitution,

[or] a positive 'realistic' model according to traditional political methods." Instead, Vattimo thinks that "communism must have the courage to be a 'ghost'" . . . whatever that means. And what sense can we make of these effusions of Jean-Luc Nancy?: "The common means space, spacing, distance and proximity, separation and encounter. But this 'meaning' is not a meaning. It opens precisely beyond any meaning. To that extent, it is allowed to say that 'communism' has no meaning, goes beyond meaning: here, where we are."

Finally, the refusal to face up to the criminal record of actually existing communism as a social system, let alone stare into that abyss until one's politics and theory are utterly reshaped by it, tells us that the new communism remains within the orbit of leftist totalitarianism. These evasions take several forms.

First, for all the talk of new beginnings, new communists often deploy what Louis Althusser mockingly called "quotes from famous people" as a substitute for serious social science. For example, Zizek argues that "one should shamelessly repeat the lesson of Lenin's *State and Revolution*" (as if the book holds the lessons, not the history). And Toscano makes the case for "communist equality" by simply repeating phrases from Marx's 1875 *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. Second, a bleaching language is employed to redescribe mass murder. Thus, there were "many restrictions on freedom" under Stalin, mumbles Gianni Vattimo. Third, a hollow rhetoric of resurrection is deployed to market the idea of leftist revival: "communism is rising from its grave once again," celebrates Zizek. Fourth, the new communists like to change the subject—from the crimes of communist regimes to the "long history of struggles, dreams, and aspirations that are tied to [communism]." So, Jacques Rancière is able to write that "communism is thinkable for us as the tradition created around a number of moments . . . when simple workers and ordinary men and women . . . struggle." For its millions of victims, of course, it is thinkable as something else. Fifth, there is a brazen promotion of evasion as a *virtue*. The "culture of memory" is right-wing, according to Bruno Bosteels, so it must be combated by "active forgetfulness"; Badiou declares that "the period of guilt is over"—as if it ever started. About criticism of Stalin and other communist leaders, he warns that it is "vital not to give any ground in the context of

criminalization and hair-raising anecdotes in which the forces of reaction have tried to wall them up and invalidate them." Sixth, definitional fiat is used to ward off criticism. Thus Zizek: "There can be a socialist anti-Semitism, there cannot be a communist one. (If it appears otherwise, as in Stalin's last years it is only as an indicator of a lack of fidelity to the revolutionary event.)"

As for the extraordinarily rich tradition of liberal and left-wing antitotalitarian thought, it is simply evaded *in toto*. From Claude Lefort, Pierre Rosanvallon, and François Furet to Norberto Bobbio, Max Shachtman, and Irving Howe, it is never seriously engaged. Zizek mockingly titled one of his books *Did Someone Say Totalitarianism?* Typically, Badiou abused Jon Halliday and Jung Chang's magnificent biography of his hero Mao in the language of the thug-commissar: "a piece of propaganda, completely mendacious, perfidious and devoid of all interest."

Indeed, new communism seems to repeat every theoretical disaster of old communism. It is profoundly elitist, rehabilitating the Jacobin notion of the educational dictatorship. Zizek argues that the mistake of the left was to accept "the basic coordinates of liberal democracy ('democracy' versus 'totalitarianism')" and suggests that we "fearlessly…violate these liberal taboos," adding, "So what if one is accused of being 'anti-democratic,' 'totalitarian'…?"

When it tries to make the turn from ethereal philosophy to practical politics, the new communism is mostly a cult of force committed to magical thinking about the transformational power of revolutionary violence and expropriation. The late Italian socialist Sebastiano Timpanaro once called this the "brutal ethics of force." Thus Badiou: "Oh, we ought to be able to say once more what Aragon, with the encouragement of Stalin, once said: 'Open fire on the dancing bears of Social Democracy!'" Thus Zizek: "Revolutionary politics is not a matter of opinions but of the truth on behalf of which one often is compelled to disregard the 'opinion of the majority' and to impose the revolutionary will against it."

The democratic socialist Eduard Bernstein issued a warning at the turn of the nineteenth century to his fellow Marxists. The danger of a "truly miraculous belief in the creative power of force," he prophesied, is that you begin by doing violence to reality in theory, and end by doing

violence to people in practice. What distinguishes the new communism is that its leading partisans are fully aware of that potential… *and embrace it as a strategy.* As Zizek puts it:

> The only "realistic" prospect is to ground a new political universality by opting for the impossible, fully assuming the place of the exception, with no taboos, no a priori norms ("human rights," "democracy"), respect for which would prevent us from "resignifying" terror, the ruthless exercise of power, the spirit of sacrifice…if this radical choice is decried by some bleeding-heart liberals as Linksfaschismus [left-wing fascism], so be it!

This flirtation with the notion of left-fascism helps explain why the new communism needs to be taken seriously. Communism itself, of course, is dead. But when Zizek recommends the "insight" of the 1970s Baader-Meinhof gang that "in an epoch in which the masses are totally immersed in capitalist ideological torpor…only a resort to the raw Real of direct violence…can awaken them," we should be concerned. Recent history tells us that authoritarian philosophical and political ideas can still find their way to the streets in advanced capitalist societies. The new communist ideas might yet connect with the young, the angry, and the idealistic who are confronted by a profound economic crisis in the context of an exhausted social democracy and a self-loathing intellectual culture. Tempting as it is, we can't afford to just shake our heads at the new communism and pass on by.