Traversing the heresies
An interview with Bruno Bosteels

Alec Niedenthal and Ross Wolfe

On October 14, 2012, Alec Niedenthal and Ross Wolfe interviewed Bruno Bosteels, Professor of Romance Studies at Cornell University and author of such books as Badiou and Politics *(2011),* Marx and Freud in Latin America *(2012), and* The Actuality of Communism *(2011). What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

Alec Niedenthal: It is well known that 1968 was a critical moment for the Left in France, but the simultaneous events in Mexico are not so well-known. What was at stake for you in making this connection more explicit?

Bruno Bosteels: The events of 1968 were definitely pivotal globally for the Left. The reason why 1968 in France was a key moment was because the so-called theories, what people now call "French theory" and the philosophical elaborations and politics stemming from it, all share this interest in "the event." Whereas Foucault, Derrida, Badiou, and Deleuze were once read as philosophers of "difference," now it is common to read them as philosophers of the event—that is, 1968. So, we might ask, "Why is it an important moment or event in the history of France or Mexico or other places where, in the same year, there were riots, uprisings, popular movements, rebellions, and so on?" But also, "What does it mean to think about 'the event' philosophically?" The theoretical traditions that led to this pivotal moment have a longer history in France than in other places where one must search obscure sources to get to the same theoretical problem. Within the French context, for institutional, historical, and genealogical reasons we have a well-defined debate that can be summed up, as what Badiou himself called "The last great philosophical battle": the battle between Althusser and Sartre, between structuralism and humanism, or between structure and subject.[1] One can place these in different contexts, but they are extreme versions of the debate on the transparency of the subject versus the opacity of the structure. What I thought was interesting was that the most intriguing theoretical (but also experimental, literary-essayistic, or autobiographical) writings to emerge from 1968 are situated somewhere at the crossover between those two traditions, breaking down both and making caricature impossible. A similar debate also took place in Mexico with José Revueltas, typically considered a kind of Sartrean humanist-existentialist writer and theorist, versus a very strong tendency of Althusserianism on the Mexican left.

Ross Wolfe: Much of this French theory centers on a struggle between structure and subject and the idea that events do not necessarily happen autonomously. The question you seem to be asking is, How do we understand the given circumstances that are not of our own making, but in which historical action takes place? Is it possible for a political subject to intervene in history?

BB: In a recent, highly philosophical book on Marx, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval propose that there are two major logics in Marx that are at loggerheads: There is the logic of capital, which is a logic of systematic constraints and turnover, and there is the logic of struggle.[2] They apply Hegelian logic to the way that capitalism posits its own presuppositions, claiming that something that enables capitalism is in fact already the product of capitalism, logically if not historically. There is this kind of spiraling movement in which it seems the logic of capital is unbreakable and that human subjects are only bearers of these functions coming out of the immanent logic of capital's own self-positing. On the other hand, there is what Dardot and Laval call the historical logic or a logic of class struggle that is contingent, working upon the gaps or moments of breakdown within the economic logic of capital itself. They claim that it all comes down to the question of whether Marx himself (they deal far less with Marxism) was able to reconcile the logic of struggle and the logic of capitalism. They believe that "communism" is almost like an imaginary kind of glue that (even though it is impossible) pretends that these two things can be held together. One of the interesting things about Dardot and Laval's philosophical reconstruction of the French debate over the competing logics in Marx is their return to the legacy of Hegel and the Young Hegelians. They see two major paths: there is either a more idealist, Fichtean approach or a more materialist, Feuerbachian approach. One path, which is the path of someone like Bruno Bauer or Max Stirner, is to insist upon the subject's capacity for self-positing. The subject can, in a sense, almost posit itself into existence; it can posit its own presuppositions almost boundlessly. On the other hand there is the more materialist school, which insists on the givenness of external factors that are not the result of the subject's own positing, but instead precede the subject. Marx, in their account, tries to hold these things together. It is in that particular moment, when Marx seeks to articulate and overcome the idealist and materialist readings of the Hegelian notion of positing the presuppositions, that a certain logic and a certain history is productively combined.

RW: Marx captures the differences between the more Fichtean Hegelians and the Feuerbachian Hegelians in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, where he writes, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."[3]

BB: These two logics, which are still at play in trying to think about the event, go back to this legacy of German Idealism. I am interested in seeing what happens when this encounter occurs (or again, in a sense, when this encounter fails to occur) between the logic of capital and the logic of political struggle. They clash precisely at the point where the logic of capital is inconsistent, in the sense that it cannot, strictly speaking, claim to have posited all its own presuppositions. Nor is the logic of the subject here one of spontaneous freedom or autonomy. But, it is precisely just as the structure shows inherent moments of breakdown, where the subject reveals itself to be structurally dependent on what Sartre called "the practico-inert." What came out of 1968 was, especially in the Althusserian and Lacanian schools, an attempt to formalize the inconsistencies of the structure. That is what we call post-structuralism. This is then tied to a new theory of subjectivity. So all these ex-Althusserians—Rancière, Žižek, and also Laclau—are, in fact, trying to hold these two logics together. It is in the notion of "the event," or what Althusser called "the encounter," that these two logics meet. This is why 1968 is so important. It is why the articulation of Althusser-Lacan or Althusser-Sartre is so important, and also explains what happened to those Althusserians who paradoxically (and against Althusser) started to become interested in processes of subjectivity.

RW: What is interesting is that the debates of 1968 were largely framed by two intellectual figures whose own political outlook was formed prior to 1968, namely Lacan and Althusser. Could you expand upon the legacies and interpretations of Lacanianism and Althusserianism in relation to 1968?

BB: It is interesting, of course, that those are the two schools that are retrospectively posited as the dominant schools. The school that was more established was of course Althusser's; it is not accurate to say that Lacanianism was well-established as a school of thought in wider circles beyond clinical psychoanalytic work. Nevertheless, by then, Lacan may well have stood as a more sophisticated thinker of the subject than Sartre. But what is ironic is that both Althusser and Lacan were surpassed by 1968 and their followers; perhaps more thoroughly in the case of Lacan than in the case of Althusser. Both Lacan and Althusser failed to perceive any political novelty or any event at all in 1968. It is rather the old, so-called "humanist" Sartre who was capable of being in the right places at the right time, as were the Situationists, who occupy a very interesting position between these two extremes. This is why the Althusserians had to first move through a moment of ferociously critiquing Althusser, both in Rancière's *Althusser's Lesson* and in Badiou's *On Ideology*.

When we go back now, we can of course see that there are elements of this interest in subjectivity present in Althusser or in Lacan, but that is an insight that comes from outside those traditions. Žižek comes to this insight out of a very interesting parallel development: anti-Frankfurt School (because a Frankfurt School-style philosophy strangely enough was the intellectual orthodoxy in Slovenia), and pro-Althusser (because he was considered heterodox). Treading that same path a decade later, trying to articulate Althusser and Lacan, the encounter between Žižek and Badiou was almost bound to happen.

The question is then: How does one articulate the capacity for making history and the inertia of the circumstances that are not chosen but presupposed? Even in Badiou's work there has been an oscillation; he either emphasizes the aspect of structural constraint or he pushes more toward a belief in humanity's capacity to will what he calls "the communist hypothesis," which is beyond or outside of history. So the ahistorical, radical political leftism in Badiou also alternates with the insistence for politics to be articulated within a given, historical situation. Whenever there is a certain leaning toward the Left he will take a turn toward the Right, or vice versa. In the 1990s, when most of this was still being worked out in isolation, he was discovered in English, at a moment when he was supposedly no longer working along dialectical lines, but in a more formalist, mathematical tradition. Politically, this expressed itself in his belief that one needed to untie politics completely from history. Anything even reeking of objectivity was actually just a subjective condition of truth. Since then, he has gone back to insisting that his work is still an attempt to continue the materialist dialectic, or a certain dialectical and materialist form of thinking, against any sort of leftist radicalism. I am interested in those oscillations, and how they repeat themselves in history both within Marx's own work, within the history of Marxism, and

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Taking stock of the universe of positions and goals that constitutes leftist politics today, we are left with the disquieting suspicion that a deep commonality underlies the apparent variety: What exists today is built upon the desiccated remains of what was once possible.

In order to make sense of the present, we find it necessary to disentangle the vast accumulation of positions on the Left and to evaluate their saliency for the possible reconstitution of emancipatory politics in the present. Doing this implies a reconsideration of what is meant by the Left.

Our task begins from what we see as the general disenchantment with the present state of progressive politics. We feel that this disenchantment cannot be cast off by sheer will, by simply "carrying on the fight," but must be addressed and itself made an object of critique. Thus we begin with what immediately confronts us.

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within the history of communism or socialism in their articulation with anarchism and individual thinkers.

AN: The most interesting moment in your interpretation of Badiou's work is the minimal difference between "the event-site" and what he later calls "the inexistent." The event-site is not a given; as you say, it is a breach that has to be opened up in a situation. For example, you say that there are formal reasons why capitalism cannot claim responsibility for its own conditions of existence, which would be "bootstrapping."

BB: There is a kind of Münchhausen trick by which capitalism claims to bring itself, as a completely self-sustaining system, into existence. The fundamental premise of capitalism is always that it builds everything, even its own historical presuppositions ("We did build that"). But such bootstrapping is not possible because there are certain outside factors that capitalism does not posit. We can name at least two, which are limited offerings: One is of course labor, or labor-power, and the other is land (which goes back to the question of Latin American Marxism and agrarian reform). Today we might add water. Capitalism did not generate or produce these things. To take these presuppositions into account, then, leads us back to a certain determinism, which is after all still what Althusser studied in terms of structural causality. What Badiou, Rancière, and the other post-Althusserians add to this is that this logic of absent causality is not actually something that moves us in the direction of more inertia. Rather, this is the logic of what happens when the structure starts to collapse, starting from those moments where the fact that there is an outside folded into the logic of capital starts to cause the whole structure to run aground. Suddenly there is a wrench in this machine that is not made by the machine itself. Badiou's use of set theory, or the use of mathematics by a thinker like Kozo Uno in Japan, as my friend Gavin Walker has shown, is really about the attempt to formalize this moment when structural constraints historically hit this wall. This is not just some formal trick, whereby somebody uses mathematics to fool people. This is really then the moment where the analysis of history—the history of capitalism's becoming and its perpetuation—can be studied so that history and logic are being articulated through the formalization of inconsistencies. This is not a universal given but something that happens only on rare occasions when the structure internally cannot control its own excesses, when things do not seem to work out so smoothly or naturally. Badiou calls such moments "events." When these situations emerge, the logic of absent causality functions on the side of the event, not on the side of structural constraint, as it did in Althusser.

But then the question is this: If this is not just a flash in the pan, where something briefly emerges and shows—let us say in a crisis, for example—that there are certain limits that cannot be folded back into the logic of capital, it also requires or already presupposes a subjective or political intervention. There is a subject, but the subject is also "split." This is why the Lacanian left tradition becomes so important, explicitly for Badiou and Žižek, but also for Rancière. Even though Rancière apparently never read Lacan or engaged extensively with Lacanianism, as he recently said in the public conversation we had at The Kitchen in New York City, in reading Rancière one still sees on a number of occasions that what defines a political subject is what he calls its "distance from itself." Thus, proletariat is not some kind of substantial identity, but something that is an empty operator that works because there is this internal splitting. The notion of the "site" of an event (which is the symptomatic place where a structure condenses the historical energy that forms around a certain inconsistency in the logic of capital) reconnects with different theories of the subject.

RW: There is a kind of obviousness to the notion of an Althusserian left, insofar as Althusser was working within the tradition of Marxism, but the notion of a Lacanian left is somewhat more contentious. Carl Cederström, for example, wrote an essay that claimed "The Lacanian Left Does Not Exist."[4] Manfredo Tafuri, an Italian Marxist, was similarly skeptical of Lacanian leftism already in the 1970s. Does the Lacanian left exist? If so, how was it assimilated into contemporary forms of leftism?

BB: Does it exist? Yes and no. Yannis Stavrakakis, Žižek, and others suggest that there is a use of Lacan that may be compatible with, or even necessary for, a certain post-Marxist, post-revolutionary leftist politics. More precisely, there is the insistence upon the inconsistency or incompleteness of social structures, but also the fact that subjects are always already predetermined by an outside symbolic order, which is how Lacan specifically defines the unconscious. Claude Lefort, for example, attempted to study the logic of radical democracy, by focusing on a notion of power or of the political field as symbolic, structured, and organized around a void or empty place. This emptiness must necessarily remain empty, without becoming substantively filled, as it supposedly was under totalitarianism. At that moment, this line of thought became very appealing for leftists who were grappling with the collapse of the Soviet Union, as they attempted to define a Lacanian concept of radical democracy. This is very clear in Žižek's first books, particularly *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and then, to a lesser extent, *For They Know Not What They Do*. I discuss this in the chapter of *Badiou and Politics* ("For Lack of Politics") that deals with this model of radical democracy that Lacanians (but also Heideggerians) tried to develop in the late 1980s and early 1990s. What Žižek uncovered soon after that, in moments of self-criticism that were sometimes phrased as criticisms of others, were the shortcomings of the Lefortian model. This is because Lefort remained too overly structural and descriptive, organizing a notion of "the political" around a fundamental lack or empty place, but without changing the structure itself. Therefore, for Žižek, something else was needed besides a philosophy of "the political," something more than a Lacanian or Heideggerian redefinition of radical democracy as a regime of politics.

As the post-Soviet left was looking to account for the structure of the political field, of "the political," the search expressed itself in terms of the Lacanian left or the Heideggerian left. That is, around the same time, Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe found in Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics a similar way of dealing with the legacy of Soviet communism. Similar, that is, to the lessons that Lacanians were drawing about radical democracy at the same time. They, too, were trying to argue for a complete emptying out of the substance, and subject, of politics. The "political field" became a *Kampfplatz* or battlefield for the articulation of "the common," in which there are no substantial identities. So even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, these thinkers had already been working out notions of "the political" in answer to the crisis and final death of Soviet Communism, and the question arose: What kind of politics can take place within such a framework of the critique of the subject?

RW: In *The Actuality of Communism* you defend Badiou against those who criticize "the communist hypothesis" as ahistorical ideology. You partially defend Badiou's quasi-Platonic conception of communism as "tactical ahistoricism," writing that, "in the present circumstances, the recourse to the eternal—the invariant—the ahistorical can certainly be justified." What do you think is at stake in defending communism as a transhistorical and eternal idea? And what were the historical conditions that first made the idea of communism plausible?

BB: "Speculative left" is a term used by Badiou in *Being and Event*. For him, it basically means a left that wills itself into existence, independently of any situation. It is a question of the total "disconnection" or what he often calls the "delinking" of a political movement from any situation that would not be of its own making. It is an idealist or even Manichean insistence on the question of the autonomy of the Left, which then is attractive because of the purity of its own shining, eternal strength. This is why for me, as I discuss in *Marx and Freud in Latin America*, the "speculative left" also expresses itself very often in a certain melodramatic articulation of politics, because there is this notion of "good" and "evil," or a pure force versus an entirely fallen, degraded existing world. It often entails moralization in terms of good and evil and the purity of the "beautiful soul," an idea common from Hegel to Lacan. So the lesson to be learned from Badiou, in terms of what to do in order to avoid the temptation of "speculative leftism," is to insist on the fact that any political movement has to be articulated within the present situation. So there would have to be a dialectic between the affirmation of the political idea and its inscription in the given circumstances. That was precisely the question that for Badiou, in his work in the 1970s, when he first mentioned the idea of "communist invariants," required an articulation of invariants and historical variation. There were certain fundamental principles that he called communist. Lately, I have been thinking you could as well call them anarchist because they are anti-property, anti-state, and anti-hierarchy. We could add anti-religion and anti-god. Those are the very simple "communist invariants." Laclau, in his book on populism and Marxism (*Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory*), already picked up on this and so did Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

I actually like the notion a lot that there is a dialectic between communist invariants and historical variation and how they are instantiated in history. Laclau, for instance, says that they are neither invariant nor communist because there is nothing specifically communist about them. What I am interested in is that I can see the advantages existing on the invariants side and I can see the advantages existing on the historical variation side. First of all, as you ask, what are the conditions that brought communism into existence for Marx? There actually already existed a mixture of socialist-communist and anarchist ideas that came together in Marx as he tried to distill them into a certain Marxian notion of communism. This makes it all the more important to understand the history behind these ideas. They come into existence at particular historical times. As someone who works at the crossover between literature and politics, I am interested in the historical complexity behind what later appears to be a pristine, self-evident idea. Those ideas are only the tip of the iceberg and it is important to study their genealogy, in the Foucauldian sense. The drawback of such an approach is that you start to lose sight of the novelty of the appearance. Suddenly, if you start studying any event and looking at the broader historical circumstances that played a role into the "coming-into-being" of it, any radical novelty seems to be explained away by referring to the historical conditions. As Rancière says, "No period is capable of jumping over its own shadow." Historicization also always comes with the risk of normalization, a confirmation that something could only happen because of these specific historical conditions. I, on the other hand, think one needs to go back and forth between invariants and historicism. There are moments where insisting upon the historicity of what we consider to be a natural fact is radical, for example when Marx writes his critique of political economy. One of the reasons it is a critique is because it entails a denaturalization and historicization of all the beliefs which classical political economists take for granted as the natural way—if you read Adam Smith, there are few words that appear as often as "naturally." To undermine the natural factor and to insist that capitalism is a historical process that needs to be unraveled suggests how the very appearance of naturalness is integral to how capital posits its own presuppositions. This seems to suggest that it bootstraps itself into existence. That critical approach requires a historicization not only of some historical event but also of the very production of the appearance of a seemingly eternal natural factualness.

AN: In the 1859 preface to the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx identifies exactly those two poles, exemplified on one side by Victor Hugo, and other the other side by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. So in what sense is this not mere repetition?

BB: Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *The Civil War in France* are exactly why people like Badiou insist on a political Marx. Badiou never writes on *Capital*. But he does say in an interview that "*Being and Event* is, by the way, a commentary on the International."[5] Why can he say that? Precisely because he is working on the very logic by which ahistoricity, the naturalness of the structure of our lives today, appears as eternal. It is a fallback position. Anything else can be rejected as being dogmatic or involuntary imposition over and above what comes naturally. It is the easiest anti-political ideology one can use. The violent logic by which capital has imposed itself over the past centuries has been by erasing its own forcing of the situation through exploitation, expropriation, wars and so on; it then gives the impression of itself as the natural expression of historical necessity. So there historicization is critical, and even in its destructive ability it shows that what came into existence can go out of existence. However, the other side of the coin is that historicization tends to explain away the novelty of what appeared. If you consider the French Revolution, historians can argue that we didn't need the French Revolution for establishing bourgeois society, it would have happened regardless. And this risk inherent in historicization is already apparent, to some extent, in Foucault, whom Badiou (in the first interview reprinted in *Badiou and Politics*) blames for dissolving any event into its historicity.

Therefore, we do not need to focus only on historical events, but also on the historical conditions that make these things happen as if beyond history. That is where what I call "tactical ahistoricism" could be effective because then you insist that there is a recurrence of very simple ideas that have changed very little until now. That is why someone like Badiou would say that there has been very little change from Plato until now. I, for my part, am interested in how it is possible that there is something in the idea of Zapatismo, for example, that transcends its historical specificity in the Mexican Revolution. In 1914–1915, in Morelos, the Zapatistas fell back on their own territory; they began to focus on the question of agrarian reform, autonomous self-government, and municipal or political self-organization with a minimum program that is reminiscent of socialism. The Zapatistas have the idea that utopia must be actualized. What happens when 80 years later that idea reemerges? I want to know what happens to those ideas when they undergo what Freud called "latency": when they disappear and then suddenly become re-politicized. They become the actual mobilizing forces in the political movement that threatens the Mexican state and they reorganize different types of autonomous, communal modes of organization in Chiapas but also in Oaxaca.

AN: You track forms of potential in descending order, with the actual "becoming-of-the-event" last as that which makes the impossible possible, which is related to your interpretation of the oscillation between actualization and virtualization in the work of Deleuze and Guattari. Finally, it would seem that the "speculative left" forgets what you call "effective justice," and instead confines itself to thinking about the specter of communism. How would you characterize the politics of this process as it is expressed through theory?

BB: Foucault proposes a variation on the philosophical term "conditions of possibility" that Deleuze also talks quite a lot about. The variant allows us to talk about conditions of existence instead of asking about conditions of possibility. This means that we are not asking a transcendental question about the condition of possibility of an event, of politics, or of judgment, but we are asking about historical conditions of existence of how a certain mode of politics, say through a strike or electoral politics, questions these forms that have a history to them.

I think one needs to retain a capacity for formalization or abstraction to recognize recurring structures, and at the same time be attentive enough to the historical specificity of when and how these phenomena occur. Currently I am working on the notion of the commune in Mexico and how the battle between communism, socialism, and anarchism can be studied by looking at that particular manifestation of the commune. Plotino Rhodakanaty writes in "La Comuna americana" (a text from 1877 published in the Mexican journal *El Combate*) that the future of the Paris Commune is in America. To follow that idea allows us to study the tensions between communism and Marxism, especially in the Bakunin–Marx debates as they were being fought out in Mexico at the same time (or shortly thereafter) as they were within the First International. And that is not simply a replication of what is happening in Europe; it is another consequence of asking a question that is not purely philosophical.

If you are speaking in philosophical terms, you are asking in terms of abstract, universal conditions of possibility; you are not asking about the institutionalization of the discourse of philosophy and at what cost that discourse came into existence. If you are French or German, you don't have to ask that question because you can speak from within that established place. But if you ask the typical question that came out of '68, "Where do you speak from?" you speak outside of that locus. To use the technical jargon, you have to justify your particularity. And immediately critics will say, "Well, you are not talking from the philosophical tradition but from your particularistic identity." The burden of particularism always falls on non-Western traditions. If you start this type of debate you end up with this knee-jerk reminder or bad conscience of the Western tradition, but it is much more than that. Regarding the communist idea, which is a distillation of a historical experience that has a series of historical moments that for Badiou can be summoned with proper names, I am not going to critique that as being Euro-centrist. It can and must be studied elsewhere as well according to the specific articulations of forms of politics and socialist or communist ideas, as in the case of the commune in Mexico.

RW: Your book, *The Actuality of Communism,* contributed to the growing body of literature that has accumulated around the concept of "communism" over the last decade. What is the significance of communism's renewed salience? What is at stake in reasserting this once tabooed concept now? What does it set out to correct?

BB: The idea of going back to "communism" has to be placed in the context of the debates during the 1980s, and especially after 1989. There was an unspoken consensus, broken very rarely by very few, to drop "communism" altogether. Due to a variety of failed experiments, deceptions by and disappointments with both Eurocommunism and François Mitterrand, or French socialism, "socialism" was put in the same bag of tried-and-tested ideas that deserve to be consigned to the dustbin of history. Jean-Luc Nancy was one of those few to break with this consensus, interestingly enough, invoking Badiou as one of the better voices to suggest that we need to retain the notion of communism, just as it made sense to hold on to the word "symbolism" in French poetry even after all the watered-down versions that came later.

On the other hand, though, this relegation of communism to the dustbin went hand-in-hand with a return to certain readings of Marx. There was a so-called "political turn" within deconstruction. Derrida published *Specters of Marx*. Michel Henry and others in Europe also wrote in this vein. There was, of course, also a revival of Italian Marxism. The posthumous writings of Althusser made a big splash, bringing in questions of a hidden tradition of "aleatory materialism," so one could have Marxism and materialism.

RW: And what about democracy?

BB: One can have democracy—even *radical* democracy! One can have socialism, as in Laclau and Mouffe, but probably not communism. And certainly not any Marxist versions of communism. One could only have Marxism minus communism.

AN: Was this not Dick Howard's position?

BB: It took years to come to the point where tactically and strategically it might be important to revisit these ideas that were either forgotten or sidetracked. Why accept this consensus? What is at stake is whether it is worth going back to this notion of communism.

RW: While he may have been its most celebrated advocate, one of Marx's enduring contributions to revolutionary thought arguably consists in his sustained polemic against rival theories of communism that existed during his time. Would you say that Marx's critical intervention into the history of the communist idea is irreducible? Or might his legacy of immanent critique perhaps be dispensable at present?

BB: For me it is not a question of going back to an orthodox notion of communism that needs to be resurrected—the result of the Marxian purging of other rival theories of socialism and communism. I am not interested in restaging these debates. It is actually more about reliving the confusion: literally the "fusion" or coming together of a variety of socialist, communist, utopian, anarchist, and anarcho-syndicalist understandings of the politics of equality (in its most generic terms). So it is rather an attempt to study how people sort out the advantages of one position over another instead of the construction of an orthodoxy out of those deviations.

Žižek writes in a preface somewhere that it is important when talking about deviations, "left" or "right" deviations from a more correct line in the middle, to realize that, in a paradoxical way, the deviations precede the orthodoxy. Deviations do not occur from a pre-given orthodoxy. The orthodoxy does not exist, except by going through the debates and the polemics that arise.

RW: So the heresies precede the orthodoxy?

BB: Yes, the orthodoxy establishes itself by purging a number of positions, which are then labeled "heresies." The energy for a rejuvenation of leftist politics lies in tracking these debates. Today one sees the same regurgitation of the whole debate between anarchist riots versus an organization that then very often has to take the form of a party, as Jodi Dean writes about Occupy. It is a different way of going through the controversies between a so-called "anarchist" position and a so-called "Marxist" or "Leninist" position. The renewed emphasis on communism is a way to suggest, in the context of a Marx without politics (without communism), that we go back to Marx as a figure who is part of a larger political landscape.

RW: Is a non-Marxian communism necessary, then? Or is Marx indispensable? Must any future communism go through Marx?

BB: No, I would not say indispensable, because then the question becomes: Why would Marx be the standard-bearer and therefore the measuring-stick by which we would gauge the authenticity of a political sequence? That seems a little exaggerated. From another viewpoint it is the same problem that is presented by the issue of socialism or communism in Latin America. The immediate way this has been tackled by historians and political theorists is to inquire about what might have been the influence of the Soviet Union, the Second International, or the Comintern in the region. So historians ask: "To what extent did they know about Marx? Did they read him correctly? Did they have enough knowledge about the Marx and Bakunin debate?" But why would that have to be the measuring stick for the spreading of socialist ideas? Which Marx? Or even more narrowly, which texts by Marx are they supposed to have read? It is a huge problem not only in peripheral countries, but for Western European nations as well. Did they have access to the right texts? The right manuscripts? That cannot be the way that one measures the emergence or reemergence of certain communist ideas. It is maybe not even that helpful to establish too rigid a divide between socialism and communism. The point is not to reestablish any lost orthodoxies but to traverse the heresies. **|P**

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1. Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985).
2. Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Marx, prénom Karl* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012).
3. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte,* available online at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm.
4. Carl Cederström, "The Lacanian Left Does Not Exist," *Ephemera*, 7.4 (2007): 609–614.
5. Gavin Walker, "On Marxism's Field of Operation: Badiou and the Critique of Political Economy," *Historical Materialism* 20.2 (2012): 39–74.

Remembrance of things past

An interview with Boris Groys

Ross Wolfe

On December 15th, 2012, Ross Wolfe interviewed Boris Groys, Global Distinguished Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. His numerous published books include The Total Art of Stalinism *(1986),* Art Power *(2008),* The Communist Postscript *(2009), and* Going Public *(2011). What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

Ross Wolfe: In the introduction to your 2006 book, *The Communist Postscript*, you provocatively assert: "The communist revolution is the transcription of society from the medium of money to the medium of language. It is a linguistic turn at the level of social praxis."[1] What do you make of the "communist turn" in contemporary left discourse, that is, the return to the idea of communism in Badiou, Žižek, Bosteels, Dean, et al.?

Boris Groys: It doesn't seem to me that any return has actually taken place. If you are speaking now of the West, not of the East, then you have always had communist parties: the French Communist Party, the Italian Communist Party, every European nation had a communist party during and after the Cold War. So I would rather speak about a *migration* of discourse away from the framework of mass parties. These became inefficient, partially dissolved, and lost their influence and power within European societies. And now we have groups of intellectuals who are asserting their hegemony over the discourse of the "communist hypothesis."

But we also shouldn't underestimate the influence or the intellectual and institutional power of the mass party. The communist party apparatus and communist press were very influential in France and Italy throughout the Cold War. And then, if we look at the intellectual trajectories of different figures, from Sartre to Foucault and Derrida and so on, all of them in one way or another defined his position in the first place *vis-à-vis* the Communist Party, much more so than in relation to capitalism. So if you look at the career of Badiou, for example, he began with a kind of Sartrean connection, but then developed a Maoist infatuation very early on, in the 1960s. His project since then was one of constant revolt against the domination of the French Communist Party. The Maoist movement, like many others from that time, was actually directed against the leading role of the Communist Party. Everything that we read now from Badiou and others comes out of this very early experience of French Maoism in the 1960s. They experienced the "betrayal" of the 1960s movements by the Communist Party, even though these movements had been partially directed against the communist parties to begin with. We can argue what happened in different ways, but my impression is that right now we have the continuation of an immanent contestation of the communist party that started much, much earlier—in the 1960s.

On the other hand, I was and still am very interested in the institutional and official traditions of communism. As with the early Protestants who saw the Catholic Church as the church of Satan, communists today claim, "All these decades and centuries of communist movements—that was *not* real communism. Communism will begin with *us*." It is a claim that one can understand, but it seems to me historically, ideologically, politically, and philosophically problematic. All of the theorists of communism today say: "We start anew. We reject everything that came before. We don't interpret or correct it—we just reject it as a fundamental failure."

RW: Just as the theorists of communism at present would say that all past forms of communism were the work of Stalin?

BG: They reject Stalin in favor of the idea of communism. But how is one to access this "idea" of communism? To stress the immediate idea of communism is *idealistic* and neglects the necessity of dealing with the materialist side of communism. Communism is not God. One cannot be a Saint Paul of communism. Sartrean existentialism, Maoist event, or Deleuzean direct contact with energies, desires, affects—these all claim to provide an unmediated understanding of what communism is beyond any tradition, institution, or party. They're direct, individual, ultimately involving only one person. That is a very Romantic, almost mystical-religious approach. Because, of course, traditionally Marxism has something to do with mediation and a disbelief in the possibility of directly grasping something like "the idea of communism," or of experiencing communism as an event.

RW: You also argue that the emphasis on the "idea" of communism leads to "a modern form of Platonism in practice."[2] What is specifically "modern" about communism?

BG: For me, Platonism does not refer to the possibility of immediately grasping the Idea, but rather to a demonstration of the *impossibility* of any such insight. What the Socratic dialogues demonstrate is the impossibility of the notion of a human being grasping the Idea because every course of argumentation collapses on itself. And this place of collapse is actually a site of power. If you look at the Platonic state, the philosopher-king is someone who actually manages and administers this space of collapse, the defeat of the desire for truth. Historically this site was the Soviet Union. What makes this a *modern* experience is the extreme scale on which it takes place.

We are living in a society that is split in such an obvious way that we no longer believe in the possibility of democracy, at least from a liberal perspective, because there seems to be no hope for consensus, which is the traditional basis of democracy. If you look at contemporary American society, or really any contemporary society, it is so fundamentally fragmented it seems incapable of reaching consensus. Such societies can only be *administered*, but cannot be brought to any kind of democratic politics. In the West, this kind of administration—in these societies beyond consensus—occurs through the market. But in the East, the market was ultimately abolished by the Bolsheviks. And so instead of being governed by economics, there was an emergence of certain kinds of administrative power practicing a language beyond consensus. The phenomenon of a language where no agreement can be reached is precisely what one can find in a very refined form in the Platonic dialogues. And the philosopher here is someone who manages language beyond consensus. What makes the Platonic problem *modern* is that it has became urgent and political, a problem of society as a whole, rather than of a small group of Greek intellectuals in the *agora*.

In Plato, the state is administered by the philosophers through an occasional application of violence, not determined by any consensus, because Plato understands that such consensus is impossible. So both capitalism and communism, especially in their Eastern European form, constituted answers to the insight that the French Revolution's bourgeois dream of reaching a sort of basic consensus had collapsed. The dream had collapsed already by the time of Marx, and then even further with Nietzsche. As long as you speak about commonalities or "the common," you remain at the level of *reflection*, which is fundamentally pre-Marxist. If you want to speak of politics after Marx, after Nietzsche, after Freud, you have to consider societies that have nothing in the way of common ground. Because if you look at the intellectual landscape before the French Revolution, and even slightly afterward, you find this kind of hope for a consensual politics or ideology. There's a belief in a natural truth, a divine truth, a common truth, a truth that's reached at the end of history. But a new, modern period of political thinking commences from a dissatisfaction with such truths. When the class struggle asserts itself the possibility of reaching consensus or a common truth disappears. How does society manage that? There are two models: the state and the market. They manage the problem in two different ways.

RW: With management by the state being socialism and management by the market being capitalism?

BG: A socialist state exists only where the state has been liberated from the market—in which the market has been either subordinated or eliminated entirely. In a capitalist state, say, in the West, the state is subordinated to the market. So what was the Stalinist state? It was a machine for the frustration of everybody, in which the possibility of achieving the truth was excluded. And what is the Western market? The same. It's a machine for the frustration of everybody, since everyone knows that whatever a politician says, nothing will come out of it.

RW: As an author of one of the books on communism for Verso: How central was Marx's thought to the formulation of communism? Obviously there were pre-Marxist communists such as Saint-Simon or Fourier or Proudhon. And later there were non-Marxist (anarchist, post-Marxist) developments or articulations of the idea of communism. But with respect to your own work the question is different, I think, in that more than the irreducibility of Marx, it asserts the irreducibility of Stalin.

BG: I would argue for irreducibility of both, and that of Marx, I have summarized already. All these thinkers you mention—Saint-Simon, Fourier, and so on—proposed improvements that were based on the possibility of consensus, on the hope of reaching a common understanding, the insight that life as it is presently is bad, but can be changed from bad to good. Marx believes that such a common understanding is impossible, because of the difference of class interests. He was, basically, anti-utopian.

RW: But didn't Marx believe in the possibility of a classless society?

BG: Yes, but only after all the classes are suppressed as classes, and this is potentially an infinite process. The traditional utopian communist ideal was based on a perception that one could take all classes, the whole population as it is, and proceed toward a new social

Boris Groys continues below

Boris Groys, continued from above

Poster from the Communist Party of New Zealand, 1940s.

truth. Marx argued that this wasn't possible. For him, one has to start a war inside society, which involved class struggle. A classless society *cannot* include a huge part of society as it is and that must be therefore destroyed. Stalin's insight was that a classless society is not something that emerges immediately, spontaneously, or even necessarily, after the abolition of the existing class system. The society that comes after the revolution is also a society that should be managed, which creates its own classes. Now the question is how one deals with that.

Marx starts his discourse with the impossibility of common interest. Everything else comes out of this. Insofar as you believe that there's something—a "desire," an "energy," "absolute spirit," whatever—that unites society as it is, you're thinking along pre-Marxist lines. To adopt a post-Marxist lens, you have to see society as something irreparably and irreversibly divided. For this kind of outlook, the question becomes how one manages this division. How does one operate under the assumption (or actually the reality) of this irreparable divide? That is the post-Marxist problem.

RW: To rephrase things slightly: Would you say that Marx's thought is the necessary presupposition or the condition of possibility for communism? And then, conversely, would you say that Stalin is the necessary outcome of communism?

BG: No, I wouldn't say all of that, for there isn't any single answer to this question. Stalin is an answer. Is it a plausible answer? Yes. Is it a likeable answer? Well, no, it's not. But it's not an answer that can be ignored. The market doesn't provide an adequate answer. Stalin doesn't provide an adequate answer either, at least, not the answer I would prefer. But at the same time, I don't believe that any answer can be sufficient if it ignores the question, and all its radical implications.

RW: Toward the beginning of your book, *Going Public*, you refer to "the period of modernity" as "the period in which we still live."[3] You roughly date it, at least theoretically and philosophically, as coinciding with Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790). The obvious political correlate to this would be 1789 and the French Revolution. Are we still—or were we ever—postmodern? If so, how does this relate to modernity, "the period in which we still live"? Might postmodernity perhaps be reaching an end?

BG: Well, when I speak about postmodernity in my writings, it's because other people use this word and believe themselves to have a certain understanding about what it means. Personally, I don't think any such transition from modernity to postmodernity ever happened. Postmodernity has never really had any meaning as a concept.

Postmodernism was associated with disbelief in progress. But nobody in the nineteenth century who was intelligent believed in progress. Baudelaire didn't believe in progress and neither did Flaubert, nor Nietzsche, or Wölfflin. "Postmodernity" was a way by which people came to understand what people already understood in the nineteenth century.

But perhaps it was only known at first by avant-garde intellectuals, elite circles of artists in Western Europe during the nineteenth century. When people speak of postmodernity, they're really talking about something that was known before but now was becoming clear to everybody. From the perspective of artistic, intellectual, and cultural modernity, however, nothing has changed. And we still don't know how to deal with it. Modern problems, as they were formulated in relation to art, culture, and writing, during the nineteenth century, remain very relevant and unsolved. The real change came toward the middle of the nineteenth century. It occurred with the collapse of Hegelianism, the collapse of European idealism amidst the industrial revolution, and with it, the beginning of intellectual and cultural modernity.

But almost as early as the disjunction between Romanesque and Gothic churches, if you will, you'll always see these "waves" in the succession of European styles. So beginning with the Renaissance, you have clear-cut forms, geometrical models, and a certain kind of clarity or intellectual transparency. But then it's followed by the Baroque period: by complexity, obscurity, and contradiction. Then you have something similar between Classicism and Romanticism. And then at the start of the twentieth century, there is the avant-garde, which lasted until 1926 or 1927. After that, though, there is this huge wave of embryonic postmodernity—historicism, Socialist Realism, Nazi art, the "return to order," and the Novecento in Italy. But all of that was suppressed after World War II. Following the war, there's a new wave of modernism—a neo-avant-garde that goes from the 1950s and 1960s, lasting through the early 1970s. Starting in 1971 or 1972, you get a kind of neo-baroque. There's *Of Grammatology* by Derrida, a baroque gesture. So there are these waves in the cultural history of Europe, shifting from clarity, intellectual responsibility, mathematico-scientific influences, and transparency to opacity, obscurity, absence, infinity. What is the Deleuzean or Derridean moment? It's the moment where they took the structuralist models, defined as a system of finite rules and moves, and made it infinite. It is precisely what Romanticism did with the Enlightenment, what the Baroque did with the Renaissance, and so on. Even in terms of Marxism, you get these waves. There is the classical period of clarity. Then there is a period of obscurity—Benjamin, Adorno, and the like.

RW: A related question: How would you say the Soviet project relates to the modern period? Do you think there's any sort of link between what's understood in the West—perhaps wrongly—as "postmodernity" and the collapse of historical Marxism in the 1970s and, after 1989, the dissolution of the Soviet Union? Is there any correlation between the post-Soviet moment and the general onset of postmodernity?

BG: Just as I don't believe in "postmodernity," I don't believe in the "post-Soviet" situation either; rather, we are experiencing an intermediate moment between two periods of wars and revolutions. Today we live under the illusion of peace and free markets, just like people did during the nineteenth century, before the First World War. Our current mode of existence is very similar to the second half of the nineteenth century: there is mass culture, entertainment instead of high culture, terrorism, an interest in sexuality, the cult of celebrity, open markets, etc.

Before the rise of Imperial Germany, everybody in the West believed it was interested in capitalism, although in Germany everyone understood it was about war. That is what will happen again in the foreseeable future. In fact, it is already beginning to happen, in that we are actually witnessing a return to a state and military infrastructure. Just as after the French Revolution, there is the reversion to antiquity, and then a new medievalism with Romanticism, the infrastructure of our epoch will be contested, and this will start a new period of war and revolutions. At that point, we'll remember the Soviet Union, and many other phenomena. |**P**

1. Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript* (London: Verso, 2009), xv.
2. *Ibid.*, 2.
3. Boris Groys, *Going Public* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2010), 10.

Jodi Dean, continued from page 2

interesting positions on this. But there has got to be a way to split the difference, perhaps using SYRIZA as a model, since SYRIZA is a coalition for the radical left. So a radical left coalition, something like SYRIZA, could be very cool to try out. It would be something more stable than just affinity groups flowing together but less unified than just one party with one line.

RW: Must these parties simply set aside their differences and unite? How would you distinguish between historically meaningful, principled splits and historically meaningless, arbitrary splits?

JD: The question is: "How much are we divided together? And how much are we divided apart?" And the answer to that question comes through practice. Which divisions do we maintain? And where do we decide to split? I don't think a lot about the historical arguments. What matters today is what we identify as the primary enemy. Is the primary enemy capitalism or is the primary enemy the state? Communists and socialists rightly recognize the primary enemy as capitalism. The problem with anarchists is that many of them see the primary enemy as the state or the state form. So they don't think that seizing the state—or trying to expropriate it in various sorts of ways by winning parts of it—matters. They think more about just abolishing it completely. That is a mistake. Whether or not anarchists and communists can work together, because we recognize that the current state is the state of capital, is an open question. If non-affiliated communists can build themselves into a party, or proto-party, that is strong and attractive enough, it would draw the schismatic parties into a kind of divided alliance—an alliance that uses its divisions to strengthen itself.

Let's face it, though: We're not Greeks. We don't have a radical history of hundreds of thousands of people in the streets in the last fifty years in the United States. We don't have it as part of our regular practice that folks can throw firebombs at the police and the police just stand by. So given where we are, it makes infinitely more sense to ask what we can pragmatically do to organize against capitalism, and replace it with something more egalitarian.

RW: As with Žižek, the history of political Marxism you draw upon has a kind of cutoff point with Lenin's death, after which Stalinism took hold. Beyond that point, the versions of Marxism that migrated or took shape outside of the sphere of Soviet Marxism—Trotskyism after Trotsky's exile, Western Marxism with the Frankfurt School and elsewhere, Maoism after the Sino-Soviet split—appear to be orphaned in the account you trace in *The Communist Horizon*. Discourse on the party ends with Lenin.

JD: Yeah, that is a totally fair point, and I think it is totally true. Where I would like to go next involves studying the German Communist Party toward the beginning of the 20th century. They were advocating forms of horizontal participation in small political structures. |**P**

What is to be done with the actually existing Marxist left?

An interview with Jodi Dean

Ross Wolfe

On October 13th, 2012, Ross Wolfe of the Platypus Affiliated Society interviewed Jodi Dean, Professor of Political Science at Hobart and William Smith College and author of The Communist Horizon (Verso: New York, 2012). *What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation.*

Ross Wolfe: Your new book, *The Communist Horizon*, builds upon a body of literature that has accumulated around the concept of "communism" over the last decade. What is the significance of this renewed emphasis on communism?

Jodi Dean: The shift towards communism puts leftist thought into a distinct political horizon. It is no longer a sort of touchy-feely, identity issue-based, and fragmented emphasis on each person's unique specificity. It is no longer a generic, attitudinal lifestyle, preoccupation with "awareness" or the spontaneous, and momentary reduction of politics to the minuteness of the everyday. Communism returns politics to grand, revolutionary possibilities—to projects of political power. And that change is absolutely, crucially enormous, even if forty years out of date.

RW: Where does your own work on "the communist horizon" fit in relation to the work of other major leftist theorists on the subject?

JD: My writing intersects Žižek as well as Hardt and Negri, with alliance to (and inspiration from) Bruno Bosteels. I get the account of communication as the fundamental aspect of economic change from Hardt and Negri. It is from them I get the account of contemporary capitalism and its political economy. I also disagree with them because they get rid of the notion of antagonism and that is the problem. Their diagnosis of informatization and communicative subsumption in capitalism is right, but they're too positive about it, without providing the force that negativity carries in critique. I get the critical aspect from Žižek.

On the importance of the party, Žižek says, "a politics without the Party is a politics without politics." I fully agree with that. Also, Bosteels and I have talked about the similarity between Žižek's account of the party in the "Afterword" to *Revolution at the Gates* and Alain Badiou's account in *Theory of the Subject*. The party is an association rooted in fidelity to an event. It holds open the space for this fidelity. The implication is that the party is not rightly understood in terms of its program or doctrine, but rather in terms of holding open the space for the subject faithful to the event, in this case, the event of 1917. This is where there is a similarity or resonance in terms of thinking about communism.

RW: In your book, you write: "The problem of the Left hasn't been our adherence to a Marxist critique of capitalism. It's that we have lost sight of the communist horizon" (*The Communist Horizon*, 6). What does "communism" provide that is missing from the Marxist critique of capitalism?

JD: Communism provides a positive moment: It is something that makes you do more than criticize and constantly subject everything to a ruthless critique. It provides a purpose and a direction for that sort of negativity to have a positivity in mind. Leftist intellectuals in particular often get lost in critique. We fetishize critique. We *enjoy* it, in the psychoanalytic sense, but the question is: What to do with the critique or how to use it to move forward—to galvanize and organize the masses? What communism provides is an orientation for critique. That is what Marx had, too. Yet, when Marxism moved so strongly into the academy that critique became viewed as beneficial for its own sake, it lost the orientation to a politics that would be willing to take power.

RW: Though he may have been its most celebrated interlocutor, one of Marx's most enduring contributions to revolutionary thought arguably consists in his sustained polemic against rival theories of communism (those of Cabet, Dézamy, Weitling, Fourier, Proudhon) that existed during his time. So would you say that Marx's critical intervention into the history of communist discourse is irreducible? Or is this legacy of immanent critique of other leftists dispensable?

JD: I don't think this legacy is dispensable. It just shouldn't be a fetish-object, right? It shouldn't be some kind of "all or nothing." My friend James Martel has a trilogy of books on Walter Benjamin. In the first of these, *Textual Conspiracies*, he criticizes what he calls "idolatry," using Benjamin's discussion of Baudelaire. James is an anarchist, and we disagree there, but his critique of idolatry as a mode of left attachment is really good. So as to your question, it doesn't need to be one thing or the other.

RW: More broadly, what is the relationship between Marxism and communism? Does one have priority over the other?

JD: I think they have to go together.

RW: Is it still possible to imagine the creation of a communist society with a pre- or post-Marxist lens?

JD: Communism without Marxism can become weird primitivism. Some of the anarchist approaches to sustainability seem to have in mind something positively prehistoric in their rejection of anything that could be a city—even medieval cities, which didn't require everyone to live in a subsistence mode of existence. Marxism recognizes that important things happened with industrialization, and communism comes out of—or has to be *dragged* out of—a particular kind of capitalist development.

RW: Oppositely, what is Marxism without communism as its goal, as with Bernstein or Kautsky? Or, as with Badiou, without the revolutionary implementation of the state as its means?

JD: Marxism without communism loses its radical goal and direction. That is what the problem with "socialism" is. Let me say a little more about this: I wasn't sure at the beginning about "communism." In the United States, it made sense from the 1990s through the first half of the last decade to think in terms of socialism. For us, socialism would be an amazing achievement, given the hideous trend of neoliberalism. However, I became more favorable to communism after reading the critiques of European social democracy, and I recognized it was a sellout to capitalism that sacrificed Marxism's revolutionary edge and, in fact, had betrayed the revolution. Of course, I feared that the same could be said for parties claiming to be "communist," such as the Italian Communist Party, which has co-opted and betrayed revolutionary Marxism just as much as some of the social-democratic parties of Europe. But in the contemporary political and intellectual turn, "communism" is important because it says "Look, we're not sanguine. We think social-democracy sold out, that socialism is accommodationist. That approach has to be rejected." Another reason for "communism" comes from the American context. No other word symbolizes anti-capitalism like communism. And that's reason enough to claim it, hold onto it, and organize around it.

I disagree with Badiou on his rejection of the state and of the party, which is tantamount to a rejection of power, and results in a bizarre condemnation of communism as some weird mental attitude. His book, *The Communist Hypothesis*, ends up promoting communism as the contemplation of this Ideal Form. We have to think in terms of a state and of a party. We need to push ourselves to imagine different forms and modes of organization and realize them differently. We can't think that every possibility has been used up.

RW: On the subject of the state, you propose a state guided by "the sovereignty of the people" rather than "the dictatorship of the proletariat." Can you explain the reasoning behind this terminological shift?

JD: There are a couple of reasons I argue for "the sovereignty of the people" instead of "the dictatorship of the proletariat." The reason I moved to "sovereignty" from "dictatorship" is not simply because "dictatorship" has a bad reputation or that it's a difficult political position to organize people around (though these are good reasons, too). It is because "dictatorship" connotes a provisional form, whereas "sovereignty of the people" lets us know that we must always be collectively governing ourselves. We have to always be steering ourselves, always mindful of a struggle against those who would attempt to oppress, exploit, or expropriate us.

RW: Does your notion of "the sovereignty of the people" allow for Lenin's (and Engels') doctrine of "the withering away of the state"?

JD: No, I don't think so. I am not sure if it makes sense for us. What makes sense for us is to think of different modes of power that we continue to exert over ourselves. Here is how I would put it: I am interested in the different modes and different ways in which we can be self-sovereign. For Lenin, there is a lot of "withering away," which means that with everyone getting new skills and being able to do the same things bureaucratically, the state apparatus will become unnecessary. In some ways I think that is right. We might think of that today in terms of various distributive forms of government or governance, but overall the language of "withering away" doesn't capture how we would continually need forms through which to steer or govern ourselves in complex societies.

RW: Insofar as Marx, Engels, and Lenin characterized the modern state as expressing the domination of one class over all others, doesn't the continued existence of the state suggest that classes continue to exist? Does this imply that a classless society is impossible?

JD: It depends on how we understand the state and how we understand classes. I want to defend an idea of communism against a bunch of the common-sense criticisms that are given, the kind raised by democrats and progressives. They tend to criticize it along the following lines: "Oh, you communists think that you'll get to an end of history where there's no more politics, and everything is just wonderful, touchy-feely unity." Laclau also has a version of this critique. The reason they have that criticism owes to the language of the withering away of the state, as if we could have forms of human sociality that would be completely without violence or oppression. We shouldn't be utopians in the sense that we believe in a classless society there will be no more conflict. There won't be *class* conflict, but there'll be different kinds of conflict, and we will need the state in some form in order to abolish capitalism, in order to take things and redistribute them.

RW: Besides sovereignty, the other component in your reformulation of "the dictatorship of the proletariat" as "the sovereignty of the people" is "the people." Following Hardt and Negri and Badiou, you distance yourself from the classical Marxist notion, elaborated by Lukács, of the proletariat as the "subject" of communism or history. Instead, you "offer the notion of 'the people as the rest of us,' the people as a divided and divisive force, as an alternative to some of the other names for the subject of communism—proletariat, multitude, part-of-no-part" (18–19). How does this amendment to the traditional concept of the "subject" of communism or history help to improve Marx's theory, or at least bring it up to date?

JD: One of the ways it brings Marx's theory up to date is really pragmatic. When you're talking to a bunch of people today, almost no one says that he's a member of "the proletariat." They may say they're part of "the people." (This, even though Marx and Lenin are very clear that "the proletariat" is not an empirical category). The term "proletarianization" is still accurate and useful, however, so I think it's important to keep that concept and think of "the people" as "the *proletarianized* people." For folks in the US, "proletariat" suggests factory labor too strongly. There are many people who don't feel like they're proletarians, even as they might recognize their existence as proletarianized, especially today because we've lost so many manufacturing jobs. There are so many precarious workers, fragile workers, so many non-workers—widespread unemployment, people who are underemployed. It's hard for those folks to think of themselves as "the proletariat." The sense of "the people" as a divided group better encompasses our own time. Frankly, I also think it includes more of the "reserve army" of the unemployed, the *Lumpenproletariat* that classical communism had mistakenly abandoned.

Now I don't mean this in any way as a rejection of the category of the worker. Recognizing "the people" as a revolutionary subject also brings communist theory up to date, because in Russia and in China there were discussions of alliances between the proletariat and the peasantry, both as segments of the revolutionary people. There was a realization in Russia and China that the category of the "the proletariat" risked being too narrow and exclusive and wouldn't account for a huge segment of the people. Both Lenin and Mao had ideas of "the people" as a revolutionary grouping and both used this language. Lukács is very clear in his book *Lenin: A Study in the Unity of His Thought* how Lenin evolved the notion of "the people" to give it this revolutionary, divided, and divisive sense. So there are good Marxist reasons to make this rhetorical move in emphasizing "the people" rather than "the proletariat." They recognized the utility of a militant account of "the people," not as a totality or unity, but as a divided group.

RW: How does your category of "the people as the rest of us" work to address the problem of revolutionary consciousness? What would something like "false consciousness" look like in this model?

JD: This is where Žižek is very helpful. In Žižek's account, ideology is not a matter of what we know but what we do. So "false consciousness" isn't the problem. The problem is what you're *doing*, and how your actions repeat. We all *know* capitalism is a system that exploits the many for the benefit of the very few, and yet we continue in it. It's not like we are deluded about it. Our contemporary problem is not that we are unaware that capitalism is unjust and wrecking the lives of billions. The problem is that we either don't have the will to get out, or aren't quite sure how to do so. It's not a matter of changing people's minds. It's about changing their actions.

RW: I would like to go over your rejection of democracy in the name of communism. This may just be tactical, given the political vocabulary today. Taking a broader historical purview, however, didn't Marx and others view communism as simply a higher realization of the democratic principle?

JD: That is because they didn't live in democracies. They were struggling for democracy. They didn't have universal suffrage, democratic governments, and so on. So it makes sense that they thought they were for that. Maybe not toward the end of his life, but Marx for the most part believed that once there was a workers' party and universal suffrage you could possibly install an elected version of something like communism. That seems likely in some of his writings. But that view is ridiculous. The bourgeoisie is not going to give up without a fight. That is why I think Lenin is so much better. In *"Left-Wing" Communism: An Infantile Disorder* Lenin argues that democracy is the highest form of bourgeois government—it is a vehicle for bourgeois rule.

We need to ask ourselves: What is the attachment to democracy? What does that mean in left-wing discussions these days? I think it's a failure of will, and even an attachment to the form of our subjection. Why do we keep arguing in terms of democracy when we live in a democracy that is the source of unbelievable inequality and capitalist exploitation? Why are we so attached to this? It makes no sense. Of course, it's not like we should have a system where nobody votes. The most fundamental things—namely, control over the economy—should be for the common, in the name of the common, and by the common (without being determined by something like voting). It should be known that there is no private property. Everything we own and produce is for the common good, and that is not up for grabs, it is a *condition* for the possibility of democracy. It shouldn't itself be *subject* to democracy, the same way that any kind of revolutionary moment or transition to communism can't be understood as a democratic move. If we can get twenty percent of the people, we could do it. But it's not democratic. Eighty percent of people don't care. Badiou is brilliant when he asks, "Why are people so intrigued by the so-called 'independent voters?' Why are people without a political opinion even allowed to decide, when they don't even care?"

RW: Like Bosteels, you object to Badiou's treatment of communism as a quasi-Platonic "eternal political idea" (37). What is at stake in this objection? If communist politics arose historically, what were the historical conditions that first made it possible?

JD: In a very banal Marxist sense, what makes communism possible has to do with the level of development of forces of production under capitalism. And then the question is, as always: Is communism yet possible? Is the fact that we haven't achieved it yet a sign that it has not yet been possible, in terms of the level of development of forces of production? Or have we just lacked the political will?

RW: Insofar as communism can thus be seen as bound up with the historical emergence and continued development of capital, what role does capital play in history in determining what you call "the communist horizon"? Does the image of communism vary from age to age depending on the social conditions that are present? If so, how?

JD: There would be things that vary and things that don't vary. The image of communism would also vary with respect to the specificities of the relations of production in different societies. The image of communism for Mao was not the same as the image of communism for Lenin. So there are all sorts of ways that one could parse this and contextualize it with rich historical detail. But even some of the abstractions about communism are helpful. My favorite of Marx's definitions of communism is "From each according to ability, to each according to need." However, one can also get very properly specific on how something like "equality" would manifest under communism, just as Marx criticizes equality as a bourgeois notion, particularly if it's going to be limited to certain abstract rights.

RW: As in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*?

JD: Right. Both notions are there in that text. You have both the critique of a certain form of equality and another image of equality. So what would be better than the abstract question of "How does it change?" Questions that are much more historically specific.

RW: How does the communist horizon appear under the aegis of what you call "communicative capitalism" (a term that encompasses both Fordist and neoliberal capitalism)? Is this any different from how it appeared under previous phases of capitalism—monopoly capitalism, classical liberalism, or mercantilism?

JD: There is something about the communicative "common" that makes things different. In communicative capitalism, we see a mode of subsumption and expropriation of the social substance that goes beyond the commodity form, and also beyond the labor theory of value. We see this in the way that Google and Facebook seize our relationships directly—without having to commodify any kind of social substance—and search them for their own purposes. There is something about the way that communicative networks exceed the commodity form that is important for the critique of capitalism and in terms of how communism might unfold or what it can be.

RW: Discussing the predominant picture of socialism and the USSR furnished by Western historiography, you note that, "there is not yet a credible and established body of historical literature on communism, socialism, or the Soviet Union. Most of the histories we have were produced in the context of a hegemonic anticommunism" (33). Beyond repairing communism's poor public image by correcting tendentious accounts of its history, is there a need for a Marxist history of historical Marxism itself?

JD: What I would really like to see, in terms of my own interests, is a history (or maybe a political science) that provides a Marxist approach to learning from the Soviet experience. What are the positive things that can be taken from Soviet history? There have been all sorts of great models and different ways of approaching the question of the workers' control of the economy, particularly the Yugoslav experience, and we need to have positive histories and reassessments of these. I am really much more interested in what we can learn for building a better party, for modeling different states, and for putting together a positive vision that is politically relevant.

RW: Toward the end of your book, you introduce the figure of Lenin in connection with your concept of the party. This takes place within the context of a discussion of the Occupy movement in 2011-12. Countering the common conception of political parties as inherently authoritarian and unrepresentative, you maintain that "the party is a vehicle for maintaining a specific gap of desire, the collective desire for collectivity" (207). What would you say is the relevance of Lenin today, in light of Occupy? Does Occupy invalidate or perhaps complicate Leninist conceptions of party and organization?

JD: In the book I emphasize that with Occupy Wall Street, the folks who were sleeping in the parks *were* a vanguard. Even if their larger movement didn't like to use the term "vanguard," they acted like a vanguard. Their activities also helped galvanize people and organize resistance. So to that extent, they were acting somewhat like Lenin, even though they might have eschewed describing themselves that way.

RW: Since the party you propose is patterned after Lenin's notion of a vanguard party, how would you approach existing political organizations that still lay claim to this legacy—who maintain, moreover, that they alone hold the "little red thread" of continuity connecting them with October 1917? What is to be done with the actually existing Marxist left?

JD: There has been a debate, by either the International Socialist Organization or some other website, about whether the sectarian parties should try to form one big party or exist as a kind of united front. And there are

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