

Fourth Michael Sprinker Lecture

Three "Returns" to Marx: Derrida, Zizek, Badiou

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*The moral right of the
author has been asserted*

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Your kind invitation to deliver this Michael Sprinker Memorial Lecture is a great honour for me. Michael was my closest friend outside the subcontinent. So, I do this not with pleasure but in sorrow, and yet with a great sense of privilege.

So, the first question is: why a lecture on these particular "returns" to Marx—and to Lenin and Mao as well—in the memory of Michael Sprinker. The primary justification is that I wanted to cleave very close to some of his own key interests. He taught literature and literary theory but philosophy was his first love, which very much included what are generally known as Continental Philosophy and Western Marxism. The few texts I shall be engaging with today signify where Western Marxism has now arrived, after much permutation. In his theoretical persuasions, Michael was both a Marxist and a philosophical realist but also, much more than myself, a great enthusiast of Althusser, about whom he did a marvellous interview with Derrida, for a book he co-edited with his colleague Ann Kaplan.¹ The names of Derrida and Badiou, very different kinds of philosophers themselves, are in fact inseparable from that of Althusser; Badiou, of course, shared with Althusser a pronounced partiality in favour of Maoism.

The very last book Michael completed, and which got published the year he died, was a Symposium on Derrida's book, *Spectres of Marx*,² to which many of us had contributed. The essay Michael showed me in manuscript when he visited me for the last, and which got published only posthumously, "The Grand Hotel Abyss,"³ was his final assessment of the political commitments of the masters of Critical theory, Adorno and Benjamin in particular. Derrida, Zizek and Badiou are, in some respects, heir to that particular tradition; and the eschatology of Inheritance, Event and Promise that one finds in these three philosophers are undoubtedly related to Benjamin's own romantic messianism in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History,"⁴ on which too Michael composed a commentary of great acumen in the essay I just mentioned. In short, this is an intellectual configuration in which Michael

himself had great interest, and the text of this lecture can perhaps be read virtually as an extension of his own "Grand Abyss Hotel" essay.

Beyond this, there is also the substantial fact that the authors I have chosen for today's discussion are, alongside Habermas, three of Europe's four most influential philosophers in our time. So, a question of some import arises: why and how is it that over the past two decades, and quite explicitly in the wake of the collapse of Soviet Union, these imposing philosophers started advocating these various "returns." In their introduction to Derrida's *Spectres of Marx*, editors of the book remark that those who initiated the project wanted to "explore the effects that the global crises engendered by the collapse of communism has had on avant-garde scholars."⁵ The term 'avant-garde' is, I think, entirely appropriate. Badiou was politically active in French Maoism in its heyday during the 1960s and 70s and is still associated with a fringe group there, while Žižek was involved in party work in Slovenia as a student. For the rest, these philosophers can hardly be identified with political activism in general and especially with the kind of politics one broadly associates with communism or the Soviet legacy. All three have produced voluminous work; Žižek alone has published over 40 books in half as many years, while Derrida and Badiou undoubtedly occupy magisterial positions in the history of philosophy. However, their work has never been involved in the body of thought that we generally know as historical materialism. Why, then, this insistence on a return to the Paris Commune as the decisive event in modern history; to Marx as the thinker of unsurpassable horizon, to the Lenin of 1917, to Mao Zedong of the Cultural Revolution, coupled with the unconditional denunciation of not only imperialist globalization but also, specifically, the restoration of capitalism in China in the wake of the suppression of that great upheaval that goes by the name of the Cultural Revolution?

Before entering into that substantive discussion I want to enter two further caveats. First, I shall not be concerned here with the larger philosophical matrix of these philosophers but only with those very few texts that directly address issues of Marx and communism, in one way or another. I have referred already to Derrida's *Spectres* which was itself based on a lecture he had delivered in California, on two consecutive evenings, in April 2003, to an audience of thousands. Chronologically, this series of texts ends with the collection *The Idea of Communism*⁶, which begins with an essay by Badiou and ends with one by Žižek, and is itself a collection of essays by some of Europe's leading leftwing thinkers presented at a conference on that subject that Žižek had organised in London in 2009, which was also attended by over a thousand people. Between these two conference events, we have Badiou's book, *The*

Communist Hypothesis⁷, and two extensive essays by Žižek, from the selection of Lenin's writings of 1917 which he published in 2002⁸ and from the edition of Mao's two essays, 'On Practice' and 'On Contradiction' that came out in 2007.⁹

My second caveat here is that I will later have to say things that are highly critical of each of our authors and the way they approach the issues at hand but it does need to be said, at the very outset, that this a body of work that does mark a break from the kind of domestication of Marx that has been going on in Euro-American high culture since the 1960s, as if Marx was just another philosopher of dialectical thought, in a long line that preceded him, from Plato to Hegel, or just a very uncanny economist with a formidable theory of slumps and crises. This break from the fashionable and acceptable Marx is far less clear in the case of Derrida but much more brashly pronounced in Žižek and Badiou who insist not only on Marx but the revolutionary Marx, and beyond Marx, the academically scandalous figures of Lenin and Mao. I might add that effectivity of texts have a lot to do with their contexts. None of what these philosophers say would have much impact outside the ranks of the marxist left if the argument came from, let us say, the Monthly Review Press. That the intervention comes from key figures of the philosophical avant-garde, whose writings are in their own way highly influential and fashionable in the Euro-American academy, does amount to breaking a great silence in the Humanities. With these caveats in hand, let me turn to some texts, productive but also highly problematic as they are.

Let us begin, then, with Derrida's book, **Spectres of Marx**, the earliest of the texts at hand and the one much more open to getting academically assimilated to the image of Marx as a great thinker whose time has passed. I lectured on Derrida's own lecture on Marx very soon after he delivered it, which too got published¹⁰ and drew very sharp rebuke from Derrida himself. Today, I will set aside most of those disagreements and will foreground some other aspects of the book.

Let me begin by recalling the moment. The year is 1993. Communism has just collapsed, in all the Warsaw Pact countries, in the midst of an unfolding counterrevolution in China. The global left is stunned, into silence and confusion. The capitalist West is gripped by a triumphalism it has not known in a century. In the midst of this, Derrida, the world's most renowned living philosopher and an iconic figure in the Humanities, takes to the podium on 23rd April, in a little university enclave located in southern California, the very heart of rightwing darkness in the United States, and he begins with a dedication. Let me read you some lines from that dedication:

And yet, and yet, keeping this in mind and having recourse to a common noun, I recall that it is a **communist** as such, a **communist** as **communist**, whom a Polish immigrant and his accomplices, all the assassins of Chris Hani, put to death a few days ago, April 10th. . . .at the moment in which, having decided to devote himself once again to a minority Communist Party riddled with contradictions, he gave up important responsibilities in the ANC and perhaps any official or even governmental role he might one day have held in a country freed of Apartheid.

Allow me to salute the memory of Chris Hani and to dedicate this lecture to him.

The word 'communist' appears in this formulation four times, and each time in block letters. This is, almost flamboyantly, an act of affiliation—in deed *filiation*—picking up the honour of the word 'communist' in a moment when this word has become mud in all the discourses of Western high culture. The phrasing that intrigues me the most, however, is "having decided to devote himself to a minority Communist Party riddled with contradictions . . ." Chris Hani, the great South African communist, is being admired for having made that decision. Now, many of us here know how exacting such contradictions within communist practice can be, and how excruciating it can be to live through them. But Derrida? He had lived all his younger years in the milieu of communist teachers and fellow-students, and he always complained of having lived a solitary life because his own convictions simply did not belong in that milieu. Within the text of the lecture, Derrida identifies himself as one who has for forty years "opposed, to be sure, *de facto* "Marxism" or "communism" (the Soviet Union, the international of Communist Parties, and everything that resulted from them . . .)" He then goes on to say that Deconstruction, his philosophico-literary mode of thinking and reading, arose in opposition to both the ideologies of liberal capitalism and, in his words, to "the most vigilant and most modern interpretations of Marxism by certain Marxists (notably French Marxists and those around Althusser) who believed that they must instead try to dissociate Marxism from any teleology and from any messianic eschatology."

The word "teleology" here refers to the idea of causation in history, even the idea of Progress as such and, more specifically, to the Marxist idea that conditions for a socialist revolution arise from inside the contradictions of the capitalism. The word 'messianic' keeps reappearing throughout the book with varying meanings, and I shall return to that presently. The question nevertheless remains: if his life and convictions were so much at odds with the whole history of communism—and even to "Marxism" (in quotation marks)—why this

dedication to Chris Hani, as a communist, for Hani's own devotion to a communist party riddled with contradictions: a man almost completely the opposite of Derrida himself. I think that his gesture of filiation in that moment of general defeat and disorientation should be seen as a reaction to capitalist triumphalism; his sense that this solidarity with the memory of Chris Hani was a debt he owed to Marx; and his wish that he not be counted among the phalanxes of pathological anti-communists. Something of this is indicated not so much in the title but the subtitle of his book "The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International." It is interesting to ask: What Debt, and to Whom? And, Mourning for What?

If the debt is to Marx, his readings of Marx's few texts—mainly **German ideology**, **The Eighteenth Brumaire** and at times **The Manifesto**—bristle with interest as an exercise in literary-critical reading, confirming my belief that Deconstruction, as a textual hermeneutic, is essentially a vast improvement on the American New Criticism; for instance, he hunts down—and often misinterprets—all the imagery of ghosts and spectres, of haunting, of metaphysical beliefs of various sorts that pervade Marx's texts. His main philosophical charge against Marx seems to be that Marx has not broken sufficiently with German Idealism and Metaphysics, and in levelling that charge Derrida remains a disciple of Heidegger. Materialism as a binary opposite of idealism still remains, he contends, in the domain of metaphysics, whereas the philosophical accent that Derrida seeks to restore to Marxism is that of supersession, an endless Becoming, with no end of History, not even an immanent design of History in sight. In Marx's own thought, Derrida contends, the present—any present—is haunted not only by its past but also by the spectrality, which is to say ghostly uncertainties, of the future. Thus it is that in the first line of Manifesto, communism appears as a spectre that haunts old Europe. If you read this spectrality as a Hegelian teleology, you get the ideology of the Second International whereby revolution is inevitable, and the certainty of communism as an end of history, as the end-product of the succession of the modes of production, is guaranteed in advance. Instead, what Derrida wants to read into the very metaphorical language of Marx's writing, where ghosts and spectres, necromancy and conjurations abound, is the idea of a radical uncertainty, stripping away the ontology and retrieving from it the concept of a Promise which then requires an infinite labour in pursuit of that potent thing that Derrida calls "universal friendship." Class struggle is, in any case, not part of Derrida's schema.

This much is clear enough. However, when it comes to the core of Marxian thought what Derrida says is much too fragmentary and allusive,

partly because of Derrida's particular way of doing Philosophy, a discipline that famously trades in the production of propositions and axioms, not in the rules of evidence that are so fundamental to the social sciences. Derrida's hallmark is to keep clear of propositions as well as rules of evidence. He writes a significant declarative sentence only when the guard is down. So, one has to largely infer what he means.

Derrida takes up several themes from Marx's writings, most of which we shall ignore, for lack of time. But I do want to briefly dwell on the issue of commodity fetishism which he presses in an interesting direction. He reads Marx's linguistic deployment very closely and raises several issues of interests to philosophers and cultural theorists, though probably not to economists. He notes that whenever Marx talks in any detail about what Marxism calls ideology, including capitalist ideologies of various kinds, including the fetishistic aura with which commodities are endowed, Marx tends to punctually employ religious imagery, gnostic and agnostic, as if ideologies functioned as some kind of religious belief and as if of commodities was itself a world of ritualistic magic, suggesting that a structure of belief could be of a religious quality without necessarily requiring belief in any particular religion *per se*, which, in turn, flies in the face of the Marxist proposition that the form of alienation specific to pre-capitalism is religious in character whereas the form of alienation under capitalism is primarily economic. Derrida dismisses that periodisation in the forms of alienation as too simplistic, with the provocative proposition that if the feeling structure of commodity fetishism is essentially that of idolatry – and if the word 'fetish' can itself be allowed as anything more than a mere metaphor without a meaning of its own – then you cannot say that the religious has been displaced by the economic as a structure of feeling, in the way human beings actually live their lives. In a related argument, Derrida also argues that the much celebrated treatment of religion in the early texts of Marx, as 'sigh of the oppressed creature' etc, is too much in thrall of Feurbach, and that the whole issue of religion is under-theorised in Marxism. It is always very difficult to quite pin down what Derrida really means but, by all inferences, he accords a far greater role to religion in capitalism – both to formal religions such as Christianity or Judaism, as well as feeling and belief unattached a particular religious doctrine – than has been historically allowed in most trends in Marxist thought, which tend to treat religion not even in the spirit of early Marx but really in the very hard rationalist tradition of treating religion simply as a clerical conspiracy. Derrida seems to ask a very different question: what would the world look like without those feelings to which a religious feeling responds – the affections and terrors of interiority, so to speak, induced by the social world itself – and how adequate

is Marxism in answering that question? This kind of interrogation and reflection is not entirely unrelated to his advocacy of what Derrida, following Walter Benjamin, calls 'a weak messianism.'

What, precisely, is "weak messianism"? In religious terms, especially of Christian vintage, strong messianism would be the certainty of belief that a Messiah shall come and redeem this world. In political terms, that would translate into the idea, associated with the Second International, that socialist revolution is inevitable, thanks to the contradictions of capitalism, and the correct party line shall only bring it closer. In other words, no matter how weak or defeated we are, history is in any case on our side and revolution shall undoubtedly come; Gramsci referred to this sort of blind faith in the inevitability of revolution as "revolutionary fatalism." Rosa Luxemburg proposed, more soberly, that there is nothing inevitable about a socialist revolution; if the proletarian revolution does not break its logic, capitalism may as well lead us to barbarism. Derrida's point, and the point of many others, is that some of this "revolutionary fatalism" is authorized by some of Marx's own writings which seem to suggest that the world is ripe for revolution, that revolution is on the horizon, that the period of transition to communism shall be short, etc. An optimism of the intellect, so to speak. Derrida, writing in the post-Soviet 1990s, and Benjamin writing in the heyday of fascism, emphasize that revolutionary horizon itself has been greatly darkened. "Weak messianism" arises as a perseverance of hope in non-revolutionary times, without the problematics of imminence but also without abandoning the conviction that what you hope for might stare you in the face as you turn the next corner. Hardly any revolution has ever been predicted. not the Paris Commune, not the Bolshevik Revolution, not the Fidelista walking into Havana and taking over with hardly a shot. Hence the idea of 'The Promise' in Derrida and of 'the Event' in Badiou. I might add that this idea of a "weak messianism" is taken from a Jewish rather than the Christian repertoire, and neither the religious origin of the term, nor the fact that the conception is a matter of belief rather than science, would perturb Derrida, even though he was not in any conventional sense a religious man. It is always very difficult to pin down a clear-cut Derridean position but, as I read him, he seems to suggest that if revolution is not inevitable but one's hopes are nonetheless attached to it, then there is always the strong element of a faith in that hope, and this hope—this Will to keep the Promise—is ethically far better than the postmodern idea of pure contingency.

If we translate all this back into the language of a more familiar kind of Marxism, what all this means is that the contradiction between the forces

and relations of production continues to be the principal force behind the possibility of a revolutionary break, and the accumulating contradictions at the base may go on creating effects on the level of the superstructure, but the moment and form of the actual implosion is entirely unpredictable. Neither Derrida nor Badiou would put it that way but their philosophical positions seek to capture precisely that unpredictability as well as the hope that the implosion shall be revolutionary and redemptive, not reactionary and fascistic. What is at stake here, according to Derrida, is a wager, a belief that the right thing shall happen; a hope that the outcome shall be not barbarism but something closer to what Derrida calls "the Promise" of Marx, deliberately keeping clear of the word socialism as the content of that "Promise." However, his refusal to engage with what a Marxist politics of our time would look like produces, in my view, two quite distinct effects. One is a philosophico-literary-critical one, that of reading the texts as texts, which he does particularly in the latter chapters of the book. That is of course an academically sanctioned way of reading anything at all, from the Bible to the Communist Manifesto, and there is nothing politically disturbing about it. Secondly, moreover, the refusal to say—implicitly even to accept—that socialism and communism are the determinate kinds of politics that arise out of any fidelity to Marx, regardless of what one might say about the past practices of socialist and communist parties, still leaves open the question of Derrida's own. This question arises out of Derrida's own repeated exclamations, such as this one:

Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task. It remains before us just as unquestionably as we are heirs of Marxism, even before wanting or refusing to be . . .

On this score, there are two basic moves. In one, there is a sharp attack on the neoliberal capitalist state system and its ideologues which tries to conjure away its own stagnation through what Derrida alternately calls "manic triumphalism" and "triumphalist conjuration" of the post-Soviet, anti-communist discourse. As he puts it : "As at the time of the Manifesto, a European alliance is formed which is haunted by what it excludes, combats, or represses." What he detects in the ideological underpinnings of the European Union is a narrow-minded religious particularism which is, in his words, "consistent with the current discourse of the Pope on the European Community: destined to become a Christian state or super-state, this community would still belong therefore to some Holy Alliance." Prophetic words, in deed! Written well before the fully fledged emergence of Islamophobia and wars of civilization over the past decade.

What kind of politics does Derrida then propose? Well, it must be free of what Derrida calls "dogmatics" and it should begin by "suspending this ultimate support that would be the identity and self-identity of a social class." Now, this conception of a politics that is freed not only from dogmatism but also of class struggle strikes me as rather an odd way of claiming to the Inheritance of "Marxism" and the "Promise" of Marx. Instead, Derrida proposes the formation of a New International, as announced in the title of the book itself. But what sort of International? Here it is in his own words:

It [The 'new International'] is an untimely link, without status, without title, and without name, barely public even if it is not clandestine, without contract, 'out of joint', without coordination, without party, without country, without national community (International before, across, and beyond any national determination), without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class. The name of new International is given here to what calls to the friendship of an alliance without institution among those who, even if they no longer believe or never believed in the socialist-Marxist International, in the dictatorship of the proletariat, in the messiano-eschatological role of the universal union of the proletarians of all lands, continue to be inspired by at least one of the spirits of Marx or of Marxism (they now know that there is more than one) and in order to ally themselves, in a new, concrete and real way, even if this alliance no longer takes the form of a party or of a workers' international, but rather of a kind of counter-conjuration, in the (theoretical and practical) critique of the state of international law, the concepts of state and nation, and so forth: in order to renew this critique, and especially to radicalize it. (p. 53)

It is really quite remarkable how much this "new International" is defined in terms of what it is not, how little in terms of what it is or might be. We had already renounced, in order to be free of "dogmatics" a very large part of Marxist conceptual apparatus: social class, ideology, superstructure. Now, we are invited, in the process of reconciling Marxism with Deconstruction, to locate ourselves squarely in an extreme form of anti-politics: "barely public . . . without coordination, without party, without country, . . . without co-citizenship, without common belonging to a class . . . alliance without institution . . . a kind of counter-conjuration," etc. Derrida does tell us that the task of the "new International" is to produce "critiques" (a very academic "International", it seems) and he also specifies the objects of "critique" (nation, state, international law) but it remains unclear, beyond much explicit negativity (not this, not that), just who, other than some writers of critiques,

are to be in this International. At least some phrases ("barely public", "a kind of counter-conjuration") suggest something resembling a Masonic order.

Let me now propose, not as literal truth but by extrapolating from the logic of his own words, that Derrida seems to be re-writing Marx here, through Bakunin, in conditions prevailing in the closing years of the 20th century. However problematic I may find those formulations, from a Marxist point of view, I must confess that there is also something prophetic and clairvoyant in those words—in two ways. First, I have been arguing for some time now that with the historic defeat of communism and the assimilation of social democracy to the neoliberal project, what is bound to re-emerge is that third current inherited from the revolutionary thought of the 19th century, namely Anarchism. And, second, the "International" Derrida proposed immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union resembles rather closely the forms of politics that became prominent soon thereafter: the proliferation of social movements, the World Social Forum, the Network of networks, and so on. Now, many Marxists may regard such political forms approvingly and strive to give them a progressive direction and concrete plans of action for this initial phase of transition in conditions currently prevailing in the tricontinent. Many from inside the communist parties may look at them in terms of a global united front against imperialism and neoliberalism, without conceding on the issue of the centrality of class politics. What distinguishes these positions from Derrida's position is his denial of social class, the organizational form of the party, the national context for politics in general, and socialism as a determinate horizon.

This may be a good point to make a transition to our two other authors, Zizek and Badiou, partly because the kind of politics Zizek proposes, after his Leninist bluster, is remarkably similar to Derrida's. Even though they share many views, Badiou and Zizek are actually quite different different kind of philosophers. Badiou is much more in the high tradition of European philosophy, like Derrida, and in this respect quite far from Zizek's manic theatricality. I would also argue that Zizek revives and praises Lenin largely in order to bury him, whereas Badiou's political commitments to Marx, communism and even Maoism are tenacious and at times profound. Even his short essay, "What Is Called A Failure?," is a far more cogent and irrefutable reflection on the revolutionary dynamic than Zizek's much publicized recent book, *In Praise of Lost Causes*, where every incisive observation is negated by another one that is simply outrageous.

Having said this, let us get to the serious core of Zizek's reflections on Lenin, which is comprised mainly of the lengthy Afterword to his selection of

Lenin's writings of 1917, **Revolution at the Gate**, and his concluding essay in the collection of conference papers, entitled **The Idea of Communism**. What Zizek emphasizes above all is Lenin's audacious intellectual capacity to discover a whole new revolutionary program and a precise strategic line of action in moments of great crisis. As he puts it, "THE Lenin that we want to retrieve is the Lenin-in-becoming, the Lenin whose fundamental experience was that of being thrown into a catastrophic new constellation in which old coordinates proved useless, and who was thus compelled to REINVENT Marxism." Zizek highlights three such moments of crisis: in 1914, when German Social Democrats voted in favour of war credits; February 1917 when his own party was entirely in favour of first consolidating the gains just made with the overthrow of the monarchy; and, finally, the dire combination of the failure of European revolutions on the one hand and the multinational military intervention in the USSR, when the Bolshevik government was still in its infancy.

The conversion of the majority of German Social Democrats, including Kautsky's faction, into German national chauvinists was so traumatic an experience for Lenin that he initially did not believe it and thought that the party paper that carried the news was a forgery perpetrated by the Czarist secret police. Upon recovering from that shock, however, Lenin's reaction was to make a historic break with the evolutionary strategy of the Second International. Without the transcendence of that trauma, Zizek argues, there would have been no re-conceptualization of the revolution as an intervention to turn an ordinary crisis into a revolutionary crisis, no preparation for a Russian revolution outside a general European Revolution, and no **State and Revolution** with its re-enactment of Marx's own writings on the Paris Commune and a rather libertarian vision of what comes after the seizure of power. That vision was so strong that in October 1917, Lenin was to say that "we can at once set in motion a state apparatus constituting of ten if not twenty million people" — in other words, a vast replica of the Paris Commune. That of course was not to be. What came instead was War Communism, a prolonged civil war, decimation of the core of the party as well as of the working class, dissolution of the soviets. and an all-powerful state whose actual complexities and eventual degradation need not concern us here.

The second such conceptual breakthrough then came after the February Revolution of 1917 with the fall of the Romanov dynasty and the rise of the Provisional Government as well as the Petrograd Soviet. In issuing his "April Theses" which called for an uninterrupted forward march to a socialist revolution through a transfer of all power to the soviets, Lenin, who had

already cut himself off from parties of the Second International, was now also swimming against the tide of his own party. Pravda dissociated the party as well as its own editorial board from the "April Theses" and even Krupskaya concluded that "I am afraid it looks like Lenin has gone mad."

The third such moment emerges in Zizek's concluding essay in **The Idea of Communism**, entitled "How to Begin from the Beginning." He quotes from a short little piece that Lenin wrote in 1922, after winning the Civil War against all odds but also retreating to the New Economic Policy, entitled "On Ascending a High Mountain." Here are Lenin's words as Zizek quotes them:

Those communists are doomed who imagine that it is possible to finish such an epoch-making undertaking as completing the foundations of socialist economy (particularly in a small peasant country) without making mistakes, without retreats, without numerous alterations to what is unfinished or wrongly done. Communists who have no illusion, who do not give way to despondency, and who preserve their strength and flexibility 'to begin from the beginning' over and over again in approaching an extremely difficult task, are not doomed (and in all probability will not perish).

Referring to these words, Zizek would call Lenin the philosopher of eternal new beginnings. "A revolutionary process," he says, "is not a gradual progress, but a repetitive movement, a movement of *repeating the beginning again and again*" and "we definitely have to 'begin at the beginning', that is, not to 'build further upon the foundations' of the revolutionary epoch of the twentieth century (which lasted from 1917 to 1989), but to 'descend' to the starting point and follow a *different* path." This clarifies what Zizek means by suggesting that the real task is to *repeat* Lenin, not *apply* him. If Leninism consists in addressing "concrete situations problems in concrete situations," then we must admit that problems in our situation at the dawn of the 21st century are so different that what Lenin actually did can no longer be duplicated, and we have to ask all over again just what socialisms of the 21st century would look like. The argument is unexceptionable.

There are numerous other matter of interest in both of Zizek's essays that I cannot address here. So, let me turn to some of the more problematic aspects of his text. First, he rejects what he calls "the spectre of an 'ethical socialism' with equality as it's a priori norm-axiom". He then affirms:

One should rather maintain the precise reference to a set of social antagonisms which generate the need for communism—Marx's good old

notion of communism not as an ideal, but as a movement which reacts to actual social antagonisms.

So far, so good. But then comes this:

... does today's global capitalism contain antagonisms powerful enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction? There are four such antagonisms: the looming threat of *ecological catastrophe*, the inappropriateness of the notion of *private property* for the so-called 'intellectual property', the socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (especially in biogenetics) and, last but not the least, *new forms of apartheid* new Walls and slums.

You will notice that class struggle is not one of those social antagonisms that might prevent the infinite reproduction of global capitalism. He then identifies three arenas for struggle: *the commons of culture*, *the commons of external nature* and *the commons of internal nature*, and observes "This triple threat to our entire being makes us all in a way proletarians, reduced to 'substanceless subjectivity' as Marx put it in *Grundrisse*." He then concludes this part of his argument with the following:

It is this reference to the 'commons' which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of communism . . . For this reason, the new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents.

Now, the three 'commons' he identifies must indeed be part of any program for socialism in the 21st century, but to suggest that this is all that the word 'communism' has come to mean in our time is to strip the word of all its historical meaning and even its radicality, in the sense that any halfway decent liberal would be glad to join Žižek in defence of those three 'commons'. And, in a phase of capitalism that not only rests on an immense class polarization on the global scale but is also driving millions more people into proletarian existence even in its core countries, it is simply indecent to suggest "we," including the icons of the Western academic world, "have all become proletarians." It would also appear that the conclusions he draws about social antagonisms and political agencies in our time are actually not very different than what Derrida had proposed in the paragraph on the New International I quoted earlier, invocations of Lenin notwithstanding.

Now, it is not that Žižek neglects social class in his writings altogether. His forty books over twenty years are so thick and garrulous that they neglect nothing under the sun. What I am arguing rather is that the question of the centrality of the class question is missing exactly where it is needed and belongs the most: in discussions of Lenin and of communism. Without that centrality,

there is no Lenin. But then, we also need to situate Zizek's reflections in his own two-sided context. As a public intellectual of Slovene origins, he comes from a zone of Europe where one can go to prison for as much as displaying the Hammer & Sickle or any other insignia of the communist past, and indeed even for wearing a Che Guevara T-shirt. Invoking Lenin and the Idea of Communism in that milieu, while he continues to work partly in Ljubljana, is undoubtedly an act of great courage. However, it is perhaps also the severity of that reversal of the socialist past in those zones, combined with the prevailing temper of radical politics in his British and West European moorings, which then impels him to lowering the horizons for what now needs to be done. The dual movement of praising Lenin and then retracting from the historic axioms of Leninism thus may well be, in Zizek's own terminology, the way objectivity comes to inhabit his texts.

Zizek's essay, "How to Begin From the Beginning," comes at the end of the collection of articles, **The Idea of Communism**, which begins with Badiou's essay of that same title, and which then reappears in his own book, **The Communist Hypothesis**. Badiou uses the term "capitalo-parliamentarian" regime for what are generally called liberal democracies, thus invoking Lenin's famous axiom, following Marx, that parliamentary democracy is the form most suitable for capitalist society; but also to argue that these regimes are 'liberal' not in the sense of even the remotest commitment to liberty but liberal in the strict sense of being founded on liberal, or neo-liberal capitalism. It is this fundamental grounding in capitalist atrocity that the dishonest discourses of political liberalism on representative democracy and human rights is designed to occlude. Badiou also uses the term "democratic materialism" for what many might simply call capitalist or imperialist ideology, to insist that universalization of the worship of the commodity, or what is generally called consumerism, is intrinsic to the life processes of the "capitalo-parliamentarian" regimes because it is only the magical spell of the commodity world that inoculates consciousness against what philosophy has generally called the "true life" and what Plato simply called "the Idea" or rather The idea of the Good. Rule of capital, electoral theatre and idolatry of the commodity must be thought not even as a continuum but as a unity because they are inscribed together into the logic of the world as we now have it, and because they seek to negate what Badiou calls "truth processes" in the history of the Idea of the Good.

Out of the very rich texture of Badiou's argumentation, I will take up just a couple of themes, in something of a short hand. The first issue he addresses is the issue of a philosophical justification of the idea of revolution in these anti-revolutionary times. A revolution he argues is a "truth process"

in the practical elaboration of the Idea of the Good as it exists at specific junctures, so that, in the final analysis, the question of its failure or success can only be judged in relation to the conditions of its own possibility, and by reference to the abstractions of a human rights discourse. The Idea itself is as old as human history but has no permanent form. Successive forms appear at different junctures. "Communism" is the determinate name of the Idea of the Good in our times. Let me clarify all this with a quotation that I have culled from an argument spread over several pages:

. . . a political truth . . . is a concrete, time-specific sequence in which a new thought and a new practice of collective emancipation arise, exist, and eventually disappear. Some examples of this can be given: the French Revolution from 1792 to 1794; the People's War of Liberation in China, from 1927 to 1949; Bolshevism in Russia, from 1902 to 1917 . . . The Great Cultural Revolution, at any rate from 1965 to 1968 . . . every truth procedure prescribes a Subject of this truth, a Subject who—even empirically—cannot be reduced to an individual . . . a truth procedure is inscribed in the general becoming of Humanity . . . there are retroactive effects of one truth on other truths that were created before it. All this requires a transtemporal availability of truths. For about two centuries (from Babeuf's 'community of equals' to the 1980s) the word 'Communism' was the most important name of an Idea located in the field of emancipatory, or revolutionary, politics. . . it is better understood as an operation than as a concept. . . An idea is always the assertion that a new truth is historically possible. And since the forcing of the possible into the impossible occurs via a subtraction from the power of the State, an Idea can be said to assert that this subtractive process is infinite.

There are three intriguing propositions here. First, political truths have retroactive effects on truths of the past; it was only in Hegel's reflection on it, which was then superseded by Marxist thought both on the Revolution and on Hegel's representation of it, and finally in the materialization of the Paris Commune itself that the whole range of the possibilities and historicity of the revolution was eventually established. In short, we know the meaning of a previous truth only in the course of an emergence of a new one. Second, Badiou's proposition that Communism must be understood not as a concept but as an operation—or, as Badiou would formulate it elsewhere, "'Practice' . . . as the materialist name of the real" and "experience of the real." In other words, not the name of a perfect society of the future but of a commitment to a truth procedure in the imperfect present whose horizon of daily practice is conditioned by the idea of the dissolution of the state coupled with what he

calls "the politics of the anonymous masses . . the victory of those with no names." This formulation comes with a footnote in which he says : "This idea goes back at least as to the Marx of the **Manuscripts of 1844**, who defined the proletariat as generic humanity, since it does not itself possess any of the properties by which the bourgeoisie defines (respectable, or normal or 'well-adjusted', as we would say today) Man."

So we get to the third proposition in the quotation: "forcing of the possible into the impossible occurs via a subtraction from the power of the State, an Idea can be said to assert that this subtractive process is infinite." I shall return to the matter of "forcing the possible into the impossible" when I come to discussing Badiou's concept of the Event. As for the infinite process of "subtracting from the power of the state," Badiou's essential reference points are The Paris Commune and Marx's writings on the Commune as well as his comments on the state in **The Eighteenth Brumaire**; Lenin's **State and Revolution** which quotes extensively from Marx and Engels on "withering away of the state"; and the crucial years 1965-68 of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. We are in the realm of Marx's famous declaration, well before the rise of the Commune, that "All revolutions perfected this machine instead of smashing it" as well as Mao's proposition that once the revolution against private property succeeds, the new bourgeoisie arises from inside the party/state and not one but perhaps ten or twelve revolution would be required for socialism to eventually triumph. In **State and Revolution** and even at the height of the October Revolution, Badiou contends, " Lenin, following Marx in this regard, is careful to say that the state in question after the Revolution will have to be the State of the withering away of the State, the State as organizer of the non-State," with functions of the State getting distributed among tens of millions of people. This is the yardstick by which Badiou would judge the evolution of the Soviet state after the failure of the European revolutions, in Germany, Italy etc and after the Civil War and the multilateral invasion of the Soviet Union. Shelving the promise of the withering away of the state and, instead, making the state machinery all-powerful over society under those circumstances is thus seen not as a subjective failure but as the consequence of the disappearance of the very conditions of possibility in which revolutionary momentum against the State could have been maintained; thus, by the terms of Badiou's own argument, the rise of Stalinism emerges not as the cause but the consequence of that objective reality.

In a similar vein, Badiou argues that Mao unleashed the Cultural Revolution when his group inside the leadership found itself in a minority, called upon the revolutionary youth to "bombard the headquarters," go among

the masses, learn from them, and develop alternate organs of popular power against a part of the state itself, but then, having fortified his own position in the leadership, called off the whole process precisely when its most revolutionary expression arose in the shape of the Shanghai Commune. As Marx had predicted in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, "The parties, which alternately contended for domination, regarded the possession of this huge state structure as the chief spoils of the war." However, that victory, gained through the calculated unleashing and then subduing of the masses, proved short-lived; the designated "capitalist-roaders" soon returned to power, and the whole bewildering process of the Cultural Revolution itself proved to be the social basis on which the architecture of capitalist restoration then arose, with mass consent. His long essays on the Paris Commune and the Chinese Cultural Revolution detail such processes at considerable length. In sum and philosophically speaking, one could say that truth processes in both cases, the Soviet and the Chinese, were interrupted by the conditions of their own possibility, producing provisional truths that can gain their meaning, relevance and place in history only in the process of the production of subsequent truths. It is always the future that gives to the past its meaning.

Finally, the concept of the Event, under which Revolution can be treated as a sub-category. On this Badiou has written a great deal in his properly philosophical works, but the basic idea can be summarised in the following sentences from *The Communist Hypothesis*:

I call an 'event' a rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages as it exists for any particular situation . . . an event is not the realization of a possibility that resides within the situation . . . An event is the creation of new possibilities. It is located not merely at the level of objective possibilities but at the level of the possibility of possibilities . . . an event is the occurrence of the real as its own future possibility.

This reminds us of Zizek's characterization of Lenin as a special kind of revolutionary realist who was able to extract the possible, *as possible*, from inside the impossible, *against* the judgement of the Second International, *against* the judgement of his own party, through "concrete analysis of concrete situations," as Lenin would say.

So far, so good. What does Badiou posit as to what one does as one waits for, or works toward, the Event. The injunctions are largely negative: don't vote, don't accept state funding, no truck with the state etc; and he is deeply opposed to what he calls the "party organization form." In the positive register, there is a great emphasis on the multiplicity of revolutionary agents

in our time but there is never any clarity as to where the working classes, *as working classes and not just as undifferentiated components of a multitude*, belong in this politics of the multiple. I do believe that there are multiple structures of exploitation and exploitation, and that there are certain issues of great importance that are shared universally, across all classes, but, as an old-fashioned Marxist I also believe in the hierarchy of social determinations whereby some are more central to the revolutionary dynamic of our time than others; yes abolishing the monopoly of the likes of Microsoft and Google through socialization of the means of communication is very important, but the class struggle of the peasantry is a matter of a completely different order – which is all I mean by hierarchy of social determinations. Of this, we get nothing from the three pre-eminent philosophers of our time. All three of them write, at one time or another, about the brutalities of colonial history and ongoing imperialist projects but none of them ever engages with what might follow from this polarization between the imperial centres and the rest of the world; namely that projects of social change may be radically different for the victims of imperialism on the one, and, on the other hand, those who inhabit the imperial centres even when they are proletarianized by their respective states.

In his own life, Badiou has been affiliated with a small Maoist group, which returns us to a variant of what Foucault used to call “micropolitics,” and this affiliation does keep the purity of enunciation in tact, but it also illustrates the gap between affirmation of the masses as the makers of history on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the preference for locality and sect as the space for one’s own action. His essay “What is Called Failure?” is a brilliant philosophical refutation of the rightwing idea that the communist hypothesis itself has to be jettisoned because a particular revolutionary project has failed but it also includes long extracts from one of his avant-gardist and tiresome plays where the burden of interminable speeches is that one must abdicate power as soon as one takes it. In short, what one gets is a peculiar mixture of a great revolutionary élan, an odd inertia with respect to the appropriate political action in our time, and an avant-gardist pleasure in retreating to the purity of the small group of the chosen few.

And yet one cannot leave it at that either. There is the always the question: why that is so? Why is it that after so brilliant an exposition one arrives at so little with which to proceed into the future? Here, I would invoke one of Badiou’s own terms: subjectivization of the objective? The objective fact in that with all the corruptions of social democracy and with so great a collapse of communism in all the zones of Europe, there really is very little left to

identify with as we proceed—to use Badiou's term again— toward new truth procedure. The blockage in thought procedure replicates the blockage in what he would himself call "the real." Sartre, in his time, had a communist process still available to him as reference in order to argue, against Camus, that he would fight not just for a half truth but even a quarter truth, so long as he had the lie of things like the Marshall Plan to fight against. The Zizeks and the Badiou's have no such referent left for riding against the contemporary rightwing hurricane as they swim against the tide. And, it should be said in their favour that they refuse to retreat into some variant of leftwing liberalism, which the overwhelming majority of western academics do. That is the grand refusal at the heart of the writings I have surveyed today.

However, the invasion of the subjective by the objective has devious ways of inhabiting the subjective, which may at times mandate reconciliation beyond the refusal: reconciliation not with what dominates completely but with the more domesticated forms of refusal: anti-statism of the social movements, for instance; or, the idea of the so-called "de-centred" Subject of History constituted by multiple agents for the revolutionary enterprise with no central agent in it; an infinite process that is everywhere but nowhere in particular. The philosophical position thus comes to reflect more and more what actually exists: not class politics but network of networks.

That would be fine, but the question still arises: why in the name of Marx and Lenin? Why propose this and still claim that this is in the tradition of the Paris Commune and Bolshevism? Well, Marx and Lenin are the two great names to which histories and memories of great revolutionary thought and practice are attached. Salvaging those memories, and detaching them from the crimes that were committed in their names, is undoubtedly a worthy enterprise. However, invoking them for forms of politics that have become very respectable in our time is a different matter altogether. I might add that it took bourgeois culture a quarter century to start digesting the artistic avant-garde of the 1930s whereas the philosophical avant-garde we have discussed today is already at the centre of High Philosophy. And, in a very different context and register, this is more or less what my late friend, Michael Sprinker, was trying to say about the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno, with the partial exception of Walter Benjamin, in his wonderful essay, "The Grand Abyss Hotel." In short, I have tried to invoke the spirit of my late friend Michael in the very texture of my text.

Thank you very much.

END NOTES

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- 6 Costas Douzinas & Slavoj Zizek (eds), **The Idea of Communism**, Verso, London, 2010.7
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- 10 Aijaz Ahmad, "Reconciling Derrida: "Spectres of Marx" and Deconstructive Politics," **New Left Review**, no. 208, November-December 1994.