

Contemporary Marxism and the New Left



Dimitar Stojanovski

Dimitar.s@gmail.com

Abstract

This article¹ examines the relationship between contemporary Marxism and the difficult project of reviving the Left as an authentic political platform. With reference to the works of Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou, the article attempts to highlight the potential of contemporary Marxism in reconstructing the Left as a serious alternative. The most basic gesture is to return the term ‘communism’ in the political discourse on the Left with its original meaning and more importantly with its progressive and emancipatory potential. By stating the mayor antagonisms that global capitalism is generating, Žižek confronts us with the danger they are posing and offers us a perspective from which these issues can be articulated on the Left. The article also opens up the question of the organisational character of the new Left having in mind the experience of the socialist projects in the twentieth century.

Key words: Marxism, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, Slavoj Žižek, Alain Badiou, political party, communism, socialism

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It is quite easy to see the structural movement towards the Right of all political ideologies that can be identified in the contemporary political spectrum. The growth and popularity of extreme rightist options such as Golden Dawn in Greece and the National Front of Le Pen in France should remind us of Walter Benjamin's remark that the growth of fascism is a symptom of failed revolution. This is a useful point of view from which to analyse the difficulties experienced by the Left, since it is the Left's failure to impose itself as a serious alternative that has paved the way for rightist options and extremism.

The question that inevitably arises is: From where can the contemporary Left regain ideological support, bearing in mind the historical development of the socialist projects of the twentieth century? This essay expounds the thesis that contemporary Marxism and its critical position towards its own intellectual and political history can provide an adequate basis for the rise of the new Left. In developing this thesis, the paper discusses some of the attitudes of the contemporary Marxist authors Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou. According to these writers, the conceptual element that will enable contemporary Marxism to be an intellectual source of constructing the Left is the idea of communism, or the communist hypothesis. At the very outset, however, the basic idea of communism should be searched for in Marx's original definition in *The German Ideology*: "Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things (Marx, 1845)."

The aim of Žižek and Badiou is to point to the critical starting-position in the idea of communism in order to emphasize an alternative political project that should be led by the Left in response to contemporary global capitalism. It is also of essential importance to remember the lessons of the failure of socialism in the past century.

To begin from the beginning

In order to save the overall noble project of the Left, and especially of Marxism, it is necessary to begin from the beginning (Žižek 2009a: 43), as Lenin pointed out when comparing the difficult revolutionary task to the challenge the alpinist faces when trying to reach the peak of

the mountain. Even if the current attempt achieves much more than all previous ones, still, the actual conquering of the peak requires repetition from the very beginning. According to Žižek, this is ground zero from which one should begin in order to reformulate the whole project; the continuation of any of the socialist projects of the twentieth century is impossible, and therefore it is necessary to begin from the beginning. It is important to mention what Žižek finds fascinating in the revolutionary personality of Lenin and why, according to him, we should “repeat Lenin”. For Žižek, Lenin is a significant political figure that should be viewed in its most radical dimension, as one that does not require guarantees from the Big Other—such as the symbolical order, or history, or democratic institutions, etc.—to take over control and make an authentic political move. In Lenin’s *April Theses*, in which he unmistakably and resolutely argues the case for taking over the government, he sees a unique opportunity to take a revolutionary step. Although he was proclaimed a lunatic (by his wife Nadežda Krupskaya) and his proposal was at first rejected by the Central Committee, his political reasoning was completely opposed to historical evolutionism, which was infectious in the period of the Second International. Lenin was aware that history would not develop in such a direction as to ensure the proletariat would come to the ruling position in society by “natural” means, especially not in a backward country such as tsarist Russia. Žižek compares this lucid political heroism of Lenin with the comfort of some of his own leftist friends from America who perfectly reflect the contemporary situation of the Left: for although they declare themselves radical leftist, anti-capitalists and the like, they still believe in the incessant functioning of contemporary global capitalism, as they demonstrate, for example, by buying shares (Daly and Žižek 2004: 50-51). In a certain sense, Lenin was in the same situation in which contemporary Marxism, as well as the Left, finds itself today: he was thrown into a situation in which the old coordinates no longer functioned and this imposed situation demanded that he reinvent Marxism. This is why he would often comment: “Marx and Engels never said a word about this!” (Žižek 2001).

“To repeat Lenin” does not mean to return to Lenin, to return to his programme and adjust it to contemporary conditions. To repeat Lenin means to renew the same impulse in the present situation, to reinvent a world revolutionary project in a time of imperialism and colonialism (Žižek 2001). According to Žižek, “to repeat Lenin” in this way means to open up the space of opportunities in which Lenin failed. Comparing the contemporary task to that of the

alpinist facing the challenge of descending before re-ascending the peak, without betraying the revolutionary mission, Lenin states: “He finds himself in a situation where it is not only difficult and dangerous to continue in the chosen direction, but it is completely impossible (Žižek 2009a: 43). Exactly this kind of a political dimension is unimaginable today in the period of expert technocratic governments that rule without ideology, and it reminds us, as Žižek states, why Lenin appears to us as if from another time dimension (Lenin 2002: 311).

The enclosure of common goods

Loyalty to the idea of communism does not mean much until we connect it with today’s situation, and especially the antagonisms we face. In addressing the difficult question that requires us to begin from the very beginning, Žižek emphasizes the following crucial antagonisms that define the uneasiness in contemporary capitalism (Žižek 2009b: 90):

- Ecological crisis
- The problem of intellectual property (private property)
- Biogenetic developments
- Social exclusion – new forms of apartheid

The first three are common goods, the common substance of our social being, which are under threat today. These include the common goods of external nature, jeopardized by pollution and exploitation, the common goods of our internal nature, in the sense of biogenetic developments enabled by the technological progress of humanity, all the way to common goods in the field of culture, for instance, the directly socializing forms of “cognitive” capital, above all language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, postal systems, etc. (Žižek 2009b: 91). Žižek’s central thesis is that *the summoning of the idea of communism is justified when it is related to the privatization of common goods, because it enables us to see the progressive enclosure of these common goods as*

a process of the proletarianization of those who are excluded from their own substance (Žižek 2009b: 92).

For Žižek, an important place in this list of antagonisms is given to the primary and privileged status of the fourth antagonism, i.e., the division between those who are included in the social structure and those who are outside of it, because only by insisting on the position of the excluded can we come to what is supposed to be the crucial characteristic of the new Left, and that is Universality. Sustaining the radical egalitarian dimension in the new formulation of communism means accepting that those who are excluded from the social body (which Jacques Rancière calls part of no-part) bear the status of universality. These excluded persons include the residents of the ghettos that appear in big modern cities, the immigrants, the increasing number of residents of poor suburbs, but it can also be easily seen how other social layers that are barely above the poverty threshold erode into this category. What is important according to Žižek is that unless we accept the primary status of the antagonism between the included and excluded groups in the social structure we lose the subversive edge of the previous three, namely: the ecological crisis is becoming a problem of sustainable development, intellectual property is becoming a complex legal challenge and biogenetics is becoming an issue of ethics (Žižek 2009b: 98). The division between the first three and the fourth antagonism is a division between the survival of humanity and justice, states Žižek, but the broadest process of proletarianization underway is common to all of them. In emphasizing this perspective through which communism will reassume its relevance, however, it is crucial not to take a wrong step and open the space for appropriation by the liberal ideology which proposes that all should be included, that all viewpoints be taken into consideration, and that human rights for all should be guaranteed. The risk of this perspective in observing the problem of the Included/Excluded is that the position of the proletariat becomes lost, i.e., the position of universality that is represented in the Excluded. As one of the rare examples in which such an attempt has been made, Žižek cites the rarely quoted example of Venezuela in the 21st century, where Hugo Chávez made the radical step of mobilizing the residents of the poorest areas (favelas). In doing so, Chávez did not include these categories of people who were barely surviving completely invisible to the political order; on the contrary, he established the Excluded as the basis upon which his specific socialism would be built (Žižek 2009b: 102).

In addressing the issue of the revolutionary agent, Žižek emphasizes the implicit distinction that is present in Marx between the *working class* as an objective category and the proletariat as a certain subjective position that represents social negativity; instead of searching for the disappearing working class, we should ask ourselves the question: “Who takes the place of the proletariat today?” (Lenin 2002: 336). The idea of the proletariat is one of the crucial concepts that needs to be rehabilitated in contemporary Marxist theory. In today’s constellation, the position of the proletariat is taken over by those whom we define as the Excluded: it is they who are today the class of oppressed and exploited and in whom universality is founded as a distinctive feature. As Žižek states, the situation is different from that faced by Marx in which the working class was a social agent; today the new emancipating policy will come from an explosive combination of various agents (Žižek 2009b: 92). What unites these various agents in the position of the proletariat is that, contrary to the classical image that they “have nothing to lose except their chains”, they are in a situation to lose everything and be reduced to abstract subjects without any significant content; with the triple threat to the common goods, they are reduced to “subjects without substance”, as Marx would say (Žižek 2009b: 92).

Life in interesting times

In the afterword of one of his most recent books, Žižek quotes the Chinese curse “May you live in interesting times!” (Žižek 2010: 403), referring it to today’s globalized world. Interesting times are right in front of us—as can be seen, amongst other things, in the difficult situation in which the Left finds itself. Thus Žižek’s question is more relevant than ever—the question as to which political option will successfully manage to articulate the dissatisfaction in these interesting times imposed by increasing social disintegration, the growth of authoritarian political regimes, and the loss of freedom in every sense, from digital to political freedom. What is especially important when we take into consideration the overall reconstruction project of the Left and of Marxism today is to locate emancipating sparks that can be taken as the starting point.

The most obvious example of the way in which the Western view is interwoven with an ideology of cynicism was provided in the reaction to the second chapter of events in the Arab world in early 2011, when states such as Egypt and Tunisia saw mass movements against corrupted authoritarian political regimes that had survived for decades. The events on Tahrir Square and the possibility of completely changing the governments in these countries were met with great reservations in the Western world because of the possibility of religious regress in these countries and the illegal manner of overthrowing governments, etc. The events in Egypt, however, began as a public reaction against the repressive regime of Mubarak—a reaction which was totally secular, with great involvement on the part of leftist, socialist activists who insisted on their right to freedom and a better life, which are undoubtedly pro-Western demands regardless of the fact that several windows of McDonalds were broken and condemnations of Obama were shouted, as Srecko Horvat states (Horvat 2011). The easiest way to stay on the safe side in such a situation is to equate the events in Egypt with those of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, where revolutionary zeal quickly turned into a fully revolutionary political installation under religious auspices. The authentic emancipating potential that was opened in the course of the Iranian Revolution and the Arab countries cannot be erased despite subsequent historical events. Analysing the election of a president in Iran in 2009, Žižek draws attention to the expressed unity of the people, their broad solidarity, creative self-organization and unique combination of discipline and spontaneity. Here we encounter an authentic popular uprising of partisans disappointed with Khomeini's Revolution (Žižek 2012: 69). Žižek locates the focus on Mousavi in the presidential elections as a type of reiteration of the revolution of 1979, where anything is possible for a short moment of historical opening. The attraction of the Iranian Revolution as an authentic political event can be seen in the full engagement of Michel Foucault, who, as a reporter for an Italian newspaper, was quick to experience and report on the situation in Teheran. As Horvat points out, the greatness of Foucault was that he decided not to be indifferent—i.e., he was right to become socially engaged despite the fact that *post-festum* he was not right, since after a while the system turned into an Islamic theocracy (Horvat 2011). This is where we can trace the elementary line of today's political strategy of Marxism and the Left in general, resolutely supported by the philosophers Žižek and Badiou: *the risk behind loyalty to the Event must be undertaken, even if the event itself ends as a "dark catastrophe"* (Žižek 2009c).

Behind loyalty to the Event lies the assumption that the Big Otherⁱ does not exist, that there is no symbolic structure that would guarantee the success of the politics of emancipation. Precisely in this direction, Lenin's step is an example of an authentic political act; just before the October Revolution he mocked the idea that this revolutionary step could be justified through the history of Marxist evolutionism. The cynicism of the Western viewpoint can be easily traced through the parallel emphasized by Žižek in regard to the support he expressed towards Egypt and Tunisia on the one hand, and Libya and Syria on the other. Although there was no emancipating movement in Libya, yet the western forces rushed into military intervention against a system with which they had cooperated for decades. In Syria there are no signs of any organized movement, and yet it is difficult to exert greater international pressure due to Israel's opposition (Žižek 2012: 72). As Žižek warns, if our cynical pragmatism means we are losing our capacity to recognize this emancipating dimension, then we in the West indeed are entering a period of post-democracy, creating conditions for our own Ahmadinejads (Žižek 2012: 71).

The organizational structure of the political struggle

In emphasizing the contours of the new political struggle for contemporary Marxism, and in the concrete example of Žižek's political theory, the question of the type of organization that this struggle should undertake is inevitable. The issue of organization is not as self-evident as it appears at first sight once we take into consideration the overall tradition of socialism from the twentieth century, in which the communist parties had great significance. There are many contemporary Marxist thinkers who reject the role of the party (either in the form in which it appeared in the twentieth century or generally), and they are in favour of alternative forms of organization. Alain Badiou is exemplary here through his involvement and efforts for the organization of immigrants who do not have regulated stay (*sans-papiers*) in the little known "Political Organization", which is considered to be post-party in the manner of its organization and functioning (Badiou 2013). Parallel to this post-political form of organized activity on the contemporary Left are the tactics of withdrawing from the state. This step is characterized by the

organizing of several lines of resistance, such as ecological organizations, anti-military movements, organizations for the protection of the rights of minorities, etc., whose main aim is to distance themselves from the domain that is under state control and to express their demands from that position (Žižek 2007). The idea behind this form of resistance is that all attempts to destroy the state have failed, while the state is only concerned with its survival and has by definition been taken over by real politics. In such circumstances in which there is no space for ethical requests, the more subversive form of fighting is that of distancing themselves from the state and bombing it with “endless requests” for justice (Žižek 2007). The political theory of Slavoj Žižek can be seen as being in complete opposition to this form of resistance; in his analysis of this phenomenon, he is consistent with Lenin’s statement (“concrete analysis of a concrete situation”), claiming that “*resistance is betrayal*” (Žižek 2007). In the specific conjuncture where in the destruction of the state is impossible, which the disappointed Left accepts, Žižek is asking why we should distance ourselves from the state—why not “grab” government and implement policies? He gives the example of Chávez after the unsuccessful coup d’état, when he triumphantly came to power through democratic elections several years later. If he had chosen a policy of withdrawing from the state and creating separate spheres of influence, he would not have been able to use the full potential of the state to drastically reduce poverty.

The issue of organization in Žižek’s theory leaves very little space for hesitation; for him “politics without the organizational form of the party is politics without politics” (Lenin 2002: 297), which is a variant of the response the Jacobins gave the Girondins at the peak of the defence of the Republic, i.e., of wanting “a revolution without revolution”. Žižek’s thesis is contrary to today’s sensibility of what can be termed a critical political engagement, but it also points to an already wrong direction accepted by the Left, where the new popular word for political activity is “resistance”. According to him, the new social movements are focused on one issue and do not possess within themselves the dimension of universality (Lenin 2002: 297). Žižek’s analytical conclusions about the events discuss the same difficulties of the situation when we are faced with the question of what should be done today when enormous social changes are necessary. According to him, protests exhaust the spirit and show the limits of Syriza in Greece. “It is not enough to reject the de-politicized rule of experts; it is also necessary

to start thinking seriously about the question – what to suggest in the place of the dominant economic organization, to imagine and experiment with alternative forms of organization, to search for the roots of the new in the present. Communism is not only or predominantly a carnival of a massive protest in which the system is brought to a halt; more than anything, it is a new form of organization, discipline and hard work... Lenin was fully aware of this urgent need of a new form of discipline and organization (Žižek 2012: 82)”. It is vital to learn the difficult lesson from the socialism of the twentieth century, and this is that a strong and well-positioned political organization is irreplaceable in order to bring about serious political changes. As Žižek says, in opposition to the repeated theories of today’s postmodern Left that we should leave behind the Lenin-Jacobin paradigm, political organization is precisely what the Left needs today. This is in accordance with the idea of the communist “constants” that Žižek and Badiou quote: consistent *egalitarian justice*, disciplinary *terror*, political *voluntarism* and *faith* in people (Žižek 2009b: 125). The importance of the workers’ movement in regard to organizational structure is also great today. Marx’s definition of the worker as a man who does not own the means of production and is forced to sell his labour on the market is especially valid. Today’s global capitalism has changed significantly from the time when a clear image of the urban factory worker could be identified in Marx’s analyses. The structure of today’s capitalist system is far more refined in the ideological sense. The former hierarchical model, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2007) state in their work ‘The New Spirit of Capitalism’, was a characteristic of Fordism, which has already been surpassed, i.e., the production relation in this model was defined as a worker and supervisor. With the domination of the services sector, however, the structure of capitalism changes; this hierarchical model is replaced by the new model in which such production relations are completely obscured. The disappearance of the term worker in the discourse of sociological, political and economic analysis does not mean that it does not exist. The crucial lesson for the new organizational platform of the Left, however, is not to limit itself only to workers. The element that puts things in motion must be the accumulation of the overall “potential of anger”, as Žižek says, from groups exploited by the existing structure of power inbuilt into capitalism. The huge mass of unemployed, the residents of poor areas and many other similar groups are proof that a progressive policy based on the principle of universality could be established. Marxism may offer an explanation in this regard as to how these groups are a true product of

capitalism, how the contradiction that Marx insisted on is present today: i.e., enormous accumulation of wealth is at the same time accompanied by a huge increase in poverty, repression and suffering that cannot be ascribed to an authoritarian leader or party but is a product of “invisible market forces”.

Fermat's theorem

The question of formulating the basic lines in contemporary Marxism and in the Left is significant in the theoretical framework of the French philosopher Alain Badiou. Starting from the basic elements on which the new emancipatory policy should be established, Badiou starts from the same position as Žižek, with a repeated return to the word ‘communism’ or, more precisely, ‘the communist hypothesis’ in its positive symbolical elements. The meaning of the word *communism* in Badiou’s analysis starts from the classical work of Marx, ‘The Communist Manifesto’, where it signifies the possibility of a different form of collective organization (Badiou 2008: 98). In an elementary sense, the word communism represents to Badiou a signifier of the policy of organized universal emancipation. Rejecting the possibility of a form of collective organization different from the existing one, Badiou points out, not only means full resignation to the market economy and parliamentary democracy (the form of rule which is suitable to capitalism), but also represents acceptance of the inevitable and ‘natural’ character of the most monstrous inequalities (Badiou 2008: 98). Moving through such broad and abstract contours of the hypothesis of communism, Badiou displays two series of this hypothesis. The first was from the French Revolution and the most fierce days of the Jacobins from 1792 to the celebrated example of the Paris Commune of 1871, when the challenge was directed to establishing and formulating the hypothesis. In the second series, which chronologically stretched from the October Revolution in 1917 to the end of the Cultural Revolution in China in 1976, the challenge was not directed towards the realization of all the concepts entailed by the first series, the mass movements, the revolutionary vision, but was focused on how to be victorious, longer-lasting and stronger than all previous ones in the history of emancipatory movements (Badiou 2008: 108). One of the authentic elements that led to the great number of

victories of socialism was the militarized and strong party-political organization. The discovery that was crucial to this success, however, became an obstacle for its long-term survival; the mutation of the party became obvious in the incapability of building a state that would be a true dictatorship of the proletariat in Marx's sense (Badiou 2008: 108).

At the very beginning of formulating the third series, Badiou wants us to pay attention to the situation in which we are by asking ourselves the question: "What do we really think when we say that all socialist experiments that were carried out under the sign of this hypothesis have finished with "failure"? Was that a total failure? By this I mean: does it require that we leave the hypothesis itself and give up the whole problem of emancipation? Was that a failure that simply showed that it wasn't the real way of resolving the starting problem? (Badiou 2010: 6)". To illustrate his case, Badiou presents us with the example of the mathematician Fermat who established an amathematical theorem that he believed he had proved—a theorem was not to be proven until 358 years later when it was verified by the English mathematician Andrew Wiles (Badiou 2010: 6). In the period when the theorem was established, numerous attempts were made to prove it, and this is exactly why "the failure is nothing more than the history of proving the hypothesis, provided that it is not abandoned (Badiou 2010: 7)." In establishing the third series of the communist hypothesis, Badiou states that it should not be seen as a simple continuation of past series but, on the contrary, the basic step is to revive the successes of the first moment where the hypothesis established its existence to the second, where there was attempt to present the hypothesis, to realize it through the revolutionary party. Today the challenge is "to establish a specific modality in which the thought which is expressed in the hypothesis represents itself among the participants involved, (Badiou 2008: 114)" and therefore the issue or organization is especially important to Badiou. Although it is not possible to know what will be the essence of the realization of this hypothesis, still, Badiou adds, "it will be necessary to discover a new relationship between the real political movements and ideology", addressing Mao's experience and lesson from the Cultural Revolution: "to have order in the organization, it is necessary to have order in the ideology" (Badiou 2008: 113).

Badiou's idea in reference to the new political framework of the Left and Marxism is that one must remain faithful to the idea of communism, understood as an alternative collective organization, which will oppose the all-present market logic motivated by profit. The alternative

must be based exclusively on the basis of the principle of universality. Badiou shows this with his active political engagement, as we mentioned in “The Political Organization”, but also with his lasting theoretical engagement, which could be synthesized in one of the chapters from his book (“The Meaning of Sarkozy”), where he says that: “*There is only one world,*” and the challenge is “*how to prove the existence of the single world, the indivisible world of all human beings, when it turns out, often with violence, that such a world does not exist in fact?*” (Badiou 2008: 53-70).” Although globalization presents itself as a wide framework that unites all nations, religions and cultures, still its dark side is large-scale divisions and isolations, new walls rising everywhere. The aim of Badiou is to establish the basic subjectivity of all people as an elementary cell for building a future political theory in practice, in which a worker from the Philippines will be no different in any aspect from a French university professor. The idea of universality is present in Marx as well, with his insistence on the internationalism of the class struggle and the clear emphasis that “workers do not have a state” (Marx and Engels 2004: 29). But Marx also underlines the bourgeois idea of universality, when it includes a necessary exception: freedom, yes – but for the wealthy members of the white race; for the other, it is freedom to sell their labour on the market. The new communist hypothesis that Badiou and other thinkers propose is based on universality that does not have this constitutive exception.

Finally, the return of the word communism which would represent this kind of policy is not trivial at all (as the dominating cynicism seeks to convince us). On the contrary, it is a crucial step on which the radical policy of the left should be built, a symbolical Master signifier that would synthesize the series of social struggles at various levels. The crucial turning-point is the complete impotence of the existing Left, as Badiou points out, following Lacan, to rise on a level of impossibility, because only in such a state can courage be affirmed as the most important virtue of political action (Badiou 2008: 114). What is certain is that the future of the Left will have to be in the spirit of modernism, through the coordinates of heroism and tragedy. The short answer of Žižek to the question as to what should be done is that of Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.”

ⁱ In Lacanian terms, the Big Other stands for subjectivising the anonymous symbolic order (How to Read Lacan, p. 41), it is also used as a register of the subject's activities (i.e., God, History, certain institutions, etc.)

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