

COMMUNISM

Our message today should be: do not be afraid, join us, come back! You've had your anti-communist fun, and you are pardoned for it – time to get serious once again!
(Žižek, *First as Tragedy*: 157)

The impact of living under communist rule in Yugoslavia is apparent in much of Žižek's writing, but only recently has the idea of communism been raised to the level of an authentic project in his political philosophy. Deemed a dissident in ex-Yugoslavia, Žižek nearly failed the defence of his doctoral dissertation because it was thought not to be Marxist enough, and he was prohibited from lecturing at the University of Ljubljana out of fear that he might lead students away from the official Party doctrine. Although moving closer to democracy by the late 1980s, running as the candidate for the Liberal Democratic party during the first post-Communist elections in Slovenia in 1990, Žižek's politics have shifted over time from the "radical democracy" of Laclau and Mouffe – the influence of which is noticeable in his earliest English books, particularly *The Sublime Object of Ideology* – towards a renewed interest in Lenin in the late 1990s (see *Revolution at the Gates*); and finally, more recently, Žižek has started identifying himself not only as a Marxist, but also as a communist. It is his new identification as a communist, and his own recent writing on the renewal of the communist hypothesis, that led Žižek to co-organize the conference "The Idea of Communism" at Birkbeck, University of London, in 2009, and a second conference in New York City in 2012.

Žižek's identification as a communist began shortly after Badiou's call for a return to the communist hypothesis at the end of his book *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (2008). Badiou's influence can be seen in the way that Žižek continues to take up the idea of communism in his recent writings, especially at the end of *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. In this book, Žižek responds to Badiou's statement that:

The communist hypothesis remains the right hypothesis ... If this hypothesis should have to be abandoned, then it is not worth doing anything in the order of collective action ... Holding on to the Idea [of communism]... does not mean that its first form of presentation, focussed on property and the state, must be maintained just as it is; in

fact, what we are ascribed as a philosophical task ... is to help a new modality of existence of the hypothesis to come into being.

(Badiou 2008: 115)

Badiou, according to Žižek, does not propose a vision of communism as some kind of transhistorical utopian ideal. Rather, communism *must* be historicized in relation to actual historical problems and antagonisms. Conceiving communism as an “eternal idea” or ideal implies as well that the problems that give rise to this Idea are no less eternal. If we conceive the communist Idea as *eternal*, then the impossibility of ever overcoming actual historical antagonisms can be perceived as equally eternal.

For Žižek, the actuality of communism requires making reference to the crises and antagonisms within global capitalism that *prevent* indefinite production. These antagonisms are, according to Žižek, crises of “the commons”. Žižek describes the latter as “the shared substance of our being” (*FT*: 91) – that is, the actual material and intellectual resources upon which humanity as a whole is dependent. Žižek distinguishes three primary domains of the commons:

- *the commons of culture*: socialized forms of “cognitive” capitalism, such as language, means of communication, education, as well as infrastructural commons, such as public transport, electricity, the postal system, and so on;
- *the commons of external nature*: the threat of pollution, ecological damage, exploitation of natural resources (from oil to rain forests and the “natural habitat”); and
- *the commons of internal nature*: the biogenetic inheritance of humanity, creation of new “humanity”, the changing form of “human nature”, and so on.

For Žižek, the *privatization* of the commons in these three domains justifies the resuscitation of “communism” and the communist hypothesis.

In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, but also in his contribution to the first “Idea of Communism” conference, “How to Begin from the Beginning”, Žižek indicates four central antagonisms that are related to the crises of the commons, each of which calls forth the resuscitation of the communist hypothesis:

- the looming threat of ecological disaster;
- the privatization of intellectual property;
- the ethical implications of the new biogenetic technology; and
- the creation of new forms of apartheid – that is, the antagonism between the included and the excluded. (*FT*: 91)

It is this last antagonism that, according to Žižek, holds the key to the salvation of the crises of the commons. The universality of the struggle of the excluded is signalled by the *enclosure* of the commons – the by-product of which is increased proletarianization – and it is here that we find the ground upon which emancipatory struggles must be fought (and won).

Žižek continues to note a significant difference between the “proletariat” and the “working class”: “to be a ‘proletarian’ involves assuming a certain *subjective stance* (of class struggle destined to achieve Redemption through Revolution) which, in principle, can be adopted by *any* individual” (*TS*: 227), while “working class” designates one’s position within the positive order of the relations of production. Žižek adds, though, that *proletarianization* is defined by the loss of subjective substance. Borrowing an expression from Marx in the *Grundrisse*, Žižek often refers to the proletariat as “substanceless subjectivity” (see, for example, *TN*: 10). Proletarianization must, therefore, be understood as a process of depriving the excluded subject of the substance of the commons.

Žižek also clearly opposes communism to socialism. Regarding the latter, he indicates that “the commons can also be restored to collective humanity without communism” (*FT*: 95) in two ways: either through an authoritarian-communitarian regime or through the return of the rootless subject to their place in a new substantial community. What he has in mind here are the two poles of authoritarian rule in countries like China and in Singapore and emerging forms of racist fundamentalism. Communism, then, has to be opposed to “socialism”. As he puts it: “While there may be a socialist anti-Semitism [as in the case of National Socialism], there cannot be a communist form” (*ibid.*). In the case of Stalinism, the emergence of anti-Semitism is, according to Žižek, only an indication of a lack of fidelity to the revolutionary event.

Rather than avoiding the failed past of communism, Žižek insists that its resuscitation requires confronting fully past regressions of emancipatory movements into hierarchical rule, from the Jacobins to Napoleon, from the October Revolution to Stalinism and from Mao’s Cultural Revolution to Deng Xiaoping’s authoritarian capitalism. In each of these regressions the communist Idea persists and survives in its failed realization as a spectre that haunts. It is in *this* sense that Žižek takes up communism as an eternal Idea (in some ways contradicting the position he takes earlier on the historicization of communism), with its own “four fundamental concepts”: egalitarian justice; disciplinary terror; political voluntarism; and trust in the people (*FT*: 125). However, he still insists that, up until our own historical moment, the Idea of communism persisted as a Platonic Idea. Today, this idea needs to be actualized in the context of real historical antagonisms (*FT*: 126).

Socialism works towards solving the first three antagonisms, without addressing the final antagonism. By making this claim, Žižek asserts that socialism should no longer be seen as a lower phase of communism, but as the only other alternative to the crises of global capitalism; an alternative that can work only by relying on various forms of authoritarianism and populism, again leaving intact the antagonism between the included and the excluded. It is the reference to the excluded from the commons “that justifies the use of the term communism” (FT: 97).

Žižek also now rejects “democracy” (by which he means liberal, bourgeois democracy) as the *status quo* alternative to the communist hypothesis. There is a tension in bourgeois democracy: it is exceptional in its capacity to make the values of freedom and equality the very conditions of possibility for exploitation and domination: “The legal-ideological matrix of freedom-equality is not a mere ‘mask’ concealing exploitation-domination, but the very *form* in which the latter is exercised” (FT: 125). For Žižek, “Democracy – in the way this term is used today – concerns, above all, formal legalism: its minimal definition is unconditional adherence to a certain set of formal rules which guarantee that antagonisms are fully absorbed into the agonistic game” (LC: 264). The way to address democracy is to ask how it relates “to the dimension of universality embodied in the excluded” (FT: 100). The (bourgeois) liberal-democratic approach to the excluded is to find new ways of *including* them in the existing system. The difference between democracy and communism has to do with the attempt to include the excluded (through formal, ideological-legal discourse, such as “multiculturalism”) into the existing order, rather than transforming society around the interests, *primarily*, of the excluded. That is, of re-organizing political space to *fit* the excluded. This is how we should differentiate between bourgeois democracy and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (FT: 102): “The goal of revolutionary violence is not to take over state power, but to transform it, radically changing its functioning, its relationship to its base ... therein resides the key component of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’” (FT: 130–31). In contrast to the old Marxist idea about the “withering away of the state”, Žižek argues for the necessity of the state. But the latter is not, for him, the form of the state found in the former Soviet Union: “Dictatorship of the proletariat is a necessary oxymoron, *not* a state-form in which the proletariat are now the ruling class ... we are dealing with the dictatorship of the proletariat only when the state itself is radically transformed, relying on new forms of popular participation” (FT: 131).

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