

The Idea of Communism

Sean Sayers

Ever since the collapse of 'actually existing communism' in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and the triumph of neoliberalism, we have been told that communism is dead. But now, with capitalism going through a prolonged crisis, the idea of an alternative – the idea of communism – is back on the agenda.

The idea of communism has had a very long history. It can be traced back to Plato's *Republic*. Nowadays it is associated above all with Marxism. It has been given a high profile recently by postmarxists such as Badiou, Žižek and others.¹ I will focus mainly on Badiou and Althusser, with whom Badiou shares certain positions as we shall see.

Marxists have traditionally distinguished two types of communist idea: utopian and 'scientific'. (Engels 1958) Thinkers like Badiou don't fit happily into either category, as I shall explain. The utopian form of communism presents a vision of an ideal future society based on a moral and political conception of how society ideally *ought* to be.² Marxism, by contrast, claims to be a 'scientific' theory, in a broad sense of that term. Its notion of communism is based on its economic and social theory (historical materialism) of capitalist society as it actually is and as it is developing.

The Marxist idea of communism

For Marx, capitalism is a specific and limited historical stage. It generates ineliminable contradictions which will lead eventually to its supersession; and communism is the sort of society that will follow after it. It will come about not because it is wished for and willed as an ideal, but because of the material – the social and economic – forces at work within capitalist society.

For decades now we have repeatedly been told that these ideas are outdated and refuted. The free market is a self-regulating mechanism which leads automatically to growth and prosperity. Communism is dead, capitalism is the only possibility. There is no alternative.

That philosophy is now thoroughly discredited. The present crisis has clearly demonstrated that capitalism is dysfunctional and crisis prone. The free market is not the benign, self-regulating system that neoliberal philosophy claims. On the contrary, it is an alien system with a life of its own. It is an uncontrollable and inherently unstable mechanism that has unwanted and destructive

consequences. In a recession such as we have been going through, huge numbers are made idle, useful means of production are wantonly destroyed.

What such economic crises show, according to Marx, is that the capitalist system is no longer capable of mastering the economic forces – the productive forces – that it itself has created. ‘Modern bourgeois society ... a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells.’ (Marx and Engels 1978, 478)

According to Marx, in capitalism, the forces of production have become increasingly large-scale and social – and less and less capable of being accommodated within the confines of the capitalist system of private ownership. Capitalism grows through a succession of booms and crises. For the economy to be able to expand in a less destructive fashion, a more social system of economic and social relations is needed. In this way, according to Marx, communism is not a mere idea or ideal, it is the form of society towards which the actual tendencies of capitalist economic development are heading.

This is the economic aspect of Marx’s analysis of capitalism. By and large it has been confirmed by recent events. However, as the present situation makes clear, and as Marx recognises, economic crisis alone is not sufficient to bring about a change of the system. There must also be a political dimension to the process. Here we come to a more problematic aspect of Marx’s theory.

According to Marx, the development of capitalism will lead also to the growth of a modern – conscious, organised and militant – working class. This is the *political* force that will eventually overthrow capitalism and create a new society.

Badiou’s idea of communism

This is Marx’s *theory* at least. A great problem for it is that this revolutionary working class does not now appear to have developed, either here in this country or anywhere else in the world. Thinkers like Badiou are responding to this situation and they should be seen in this context.

Badiou has done a great deal in recent years to promote the idea of communism through his writings, and in talks and conferences.³ He insistently proclaims that he is a communist, but he doesn’t fit easily into the traditional Marxist categories. He is not a ‘utopian’ – he doesn’t talk about what a future society might ideally be like; and, although he makes a lot of reference to Marx, he is not a ‘traditional’ Marxist either (he is sometimes described as a ‘postmarxist’).

He rejects Marx's theory of history, but not in favour of a utopian ideal. Instead, he puts forward a different theory of history, and this leads to a different sort of politics. I say a different 'theory of history', but it would perhaps be more accurate to say that he is sceptical of theories of history altogether. For he rejects the idea that there is a pattern or logic in history as a Hegelian distortion of Marxism.

History, he maintains, is punctuated by series of arbitrary and unpredictable interruptions and breaks. This sort of view has been particularly influential in recent French philosophy: it is put forward, in one form or another, not just by Badiou, but also by Foucault, Deleuze, Lyotard and, in relation to Marxism, particularly by Althusser. All these philosophers reject the idea that history follows a necessary course; they insist that it involves ruptures and discontinuities. According to Althusser (2006), for example, history is an 'aleatory' process, governed by chance; and Badiou stresses the role of the 'event': an unpredictable occurrence which set the course of development on a new and different path. Badiou's favourite example of a supposedly unheralded 'event' are the demonstrations of May '68 in Paris; he also often cites the Cultural Revolution in China.

These events seemed to erupt suddenly out of nowhere. They were surprising, even to their participants. But that does not show that they arose from nowhere. On the contrary, they were the outcome of previous developments and larger forces. This is clear when they are seen in their wider historical context.

For example, the events of May '68 in France were part of a much larger series of movements for change that was growing throughout the 1960s. These included the civil rights movement in the USA, numerous struggles against imperialism in many places, focused particularly on opposition to the war in Vietnam, and other peace and student protest movements. These all culminated eventually in 'events', not just in Paris, but in a global convulsion that came to a head in that year, with student and other mass protests all over the capitalist world, and massive upheavals in the non-capitalist world as well: the Cultural Revolution in China, the Prague spring, etc.

To see that there is this wider context to the events of May '68 in France does not, of course, explain them. However, it does indicate that to understand them one must look to the wider historical conditions that led to them. That is the only rational approach to seeking an understanding of why these events occurred. As Bensaïd (2004) argues, referring to some other supposed 'events' cited by Badiou:

the storming of the Bastille can be understood only in the context of the *Ancien Régime*; the confrontation of June 1848 can be understood only in the context of urbanization and industrialization; the insurrection of the Paris Commune can be understood only in the context of the commotion of European nationalities and the collapse of the Second Empire; the October Revolution can be understood only in the particular context of ‘capitalist development in Russia’ and the convulsive outcome of the Great War.

No doubt Badiou would insist that he does not deny all this. The ‘event’, he acknowledges, is always ‘situated’, it is connected with the circumstances in which it arises. He says, for example:

The event is both situated – it is the event of this or that situation – and supplementary thus *absolutely* [my italics, SS] detached from, or unrelated to, all the rules of the situation ... You might then ask what it is that makes the connection between the event and that ‘for which’ it is an event. This connection is the void of the earlier situation. (Badiou 2001, 68)

However, the mere ‘void’ of the earlier situation is no help in establishing this connection since it is completely indeterminate. Thus although Badiou tries to ‘situate’ the event in this way, he immediately negates this by maintaining that the event is also ‘absolutely detached’ from the situation; and the evident contradiction between these two positions is left unresolved. However, the emphasis in most of his writings is very firmly on the aspect of detachment. (Bensaïd 2004)

Change and continuity

The relation between change and continuity is an important topic in Marxist philosophy. Its ideas in this area are strongly influenced by Hegel’s philosophy. Although Marx sees history as progress, he does not hold that this always occurs in a steady and gradual way. Like Hegel, he sees history as divided into a series of distinct stages. Within each stage, change does occur gradually; but then there is a sudden radical break – a revolutionary rupture – and a new stage begins.⁴

However, both Marx and Hegel reject the idea that such breaks are arbitrary or unpredictable Badiou-style ‘events’ that arise entirely unheralded and unpredictably, as if from nowhere. That is, they reject the idea that they are *mere* discontinuities, entirely uncaused.

Hegel and Marx both adhere to the Kantian view that it is a 'regulative principle' – a fundamental principle of rational thought – to assume that every event has a cause, even if that cause is not known or understood. The idea of events that arise *ex nihilo*, uncaused and unheralded, goes against this: it is tantamount to the idea of a 'secular miracle', as Bensaïd (2004) puts it (cf Landa 2013).

According to the Marxist and Hegelian – dialectical – account, gradual, incremental, quantitative changes give rise eventually to radical and revolutionary – qualitative – transformations.⁵ But these qualitative – revolutionary – changes are not the absolute, total, abrupt and arbitrary breaks imagined by Badiou, Althusser and the like – they do not arise out of nowhere. On the contrary, there is an essential connection between the gradual, quantitative phase of development and the revolutionary, qualitative break to which it eventually gives rise. There is continuity as well as discontinuity.

A revolutionary break may well seem sudden and unexpected, but it is never entirely unheralded for all that: there are signs of the impending revolutionary event in the period leading up to it. Hegel (1977, 6-7) gives a good description of these with reference to the French Revolution of 1789 as follows.

Just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth - there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born - so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms. The frivolity and boredom which unsettle the established order, the vague foreboding of something unknown, these are the heralds of approaching change. The gradual crumbling that left unaltered the face of the whole is cut short by a sunburst which, in one flash, illuminates the features of the new world.

For Hegel, the transition from qualitative to quantitative change is a universal logical (ontological) principle. Engels treats it in same way when he proclaims that the 'transformation of quantity into quality and vice versa' is one of three fundamental 'laws' of dialectics. (Engels 1964, 63) One does not need to be committed to anything so far-reaching in order to regard it as providing an illuminating framework for understanding historical change.

Determinism

The idea that there is a (dialectical) logic of this sort to history, and that historical development occurs through series of necessary stages, constitutes a

form of determinism. As such it regularly provokes the criticism that it must therefore exclude any role for politics or free agency.

Badiou's philosophy of the 'event' and his 'communist idea', by contrast, are based upon the thought that the future is uncertain and open. In Althusser's (2006, 264) words, this way of thinking presupposes: 'a history which is present ... living ... open to a future ... uncertain, unforeseeable, not yet accomplished.'

These philosophers do not claim that communism will *actually* follow after capitalism, only that capitalism has a 'communist horizon' as Jodi Dean (2012) puts it: a communist alternative is *possible* (Badiou 2010, 13).

This sounds all very reasonable, but as an account of communism, it simply won't do. The mere uncertainty of the future does not disclose anything specific about it. If we don't know anything about what is over the horizon we are in no position to say that it will be communism: it may equally well be more capitalism, or fascism, or anything else.

Marxism, too, maintains that capitalism has a 'horizon', but not in this abstract and purely formal fashion. Fundamental to Marx's outlook is the theory that there are determinate and objective – economic, social and historical – forces at work within capitalism, creating contradictions that are leading to its supersession and towards a specifically socialist sort of society in the future.

This is not to say there is a simple determinism at work, or that the system will collapse automatically because of its internal contradictions and give rise spontaneously to a new order. Political agency and activity must also be involved. However, the impact of this agency is limited. 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.' (Marx 1973, 146)

These circumstances circumscribe what can be done and what can be achieved. In given conditions only certain things are possible and it is an illusion to believe otherwise. Social change can be brought about only given the necessary material conditions. This is the materialist view, the Marxist view.

If [the] material elements of a complete revolution are not present (namely, on the one hand the existing productive forces, on the other the formation of a revolutionary mass ...), then, as far as practical development is concerned, it is absolutely immaterial whether the idea

of this revolution has been expressed a hundred times already, as the history of communism proves. (Marx and Engels 1970, 59)

The effect of seeing history as an arbitrary and unpredictable process is to deny this. It is to imagine that communism can be the result of pure freewill and commitment alone, unconnected with historical circumstances. This philosophy thus rejects the Marxist theory of history, and makes communism into a purely voluntaristic and purely political idea.

Bosteels is therefore right to make the paradoxical sounding suggestion that Badiou is 'a philosopher who is first and foremost a communist before being, or perhaps even without being, a Marxist.' (Bosteels 2005, 751)

The Marxist idea of communism is not simply a political idea of this (Nietzschean) sort. Marxism is a historical and materialist theory, as I have been stressing. It implies that the future is *not* entirely 'open'.

This does not mean that it denies freedom or political agency. It is wrong to imagine that freedom and determinism are incompatible. Freedom does not require us to transcend our material conditions – that is impossible. Freedom consists not in the absence of determination, but rather in the capacity for *self*-determination. It depends therefore on the development of our abilities and capacities – and these develop as our material powers grow, socially and historically.

In short, Marxism *is* a form of determinism, but not of a rigid or mechanical kind. History does not have that sort of precision or simplicity. Although Marxism holds that societies normally pass through a series of stages (feudalism, capitalism, socialism), this should not be seen as an inevitable and unavoidable process. Marx himself was remarkably undogmatic and open on this matter. Towards the end of his life, he seriously considered the idea that the persistence of traditional communal forms of property in nineteenth Russia might create a basis for communism in Russia and enable it to skip the capitalist stage.

Some have recently seized upon this as grounds to argue that Marx came to abandon the theory of historical stages altogether and adopt a more open and indeterminate account of historical development. (de Paula 2015, White 1996, Zarembka 2001) However, there is little basis for that view. Marx certainly recognised that the persistence of precapitalist communal forms into the capitalist period was an anomaly and a problem for the theory of progressive development through stages; and he acknowledged that different paths of development might be possible. However, that is not to say that he abandoned

the historical framework of historical materialism altogether. There is a huge difference between saying that Marx recognised problems and difficulties with his theory of history and that he abandoned it altogether. There is no serious evidence to suggest that he did that. (Sayers 1999, Sayers 2001)

The present situation

Let us now return to the present situation. Capitalism has been going through a crisis of just the sort that Marx describes in his work, and that has put the idea of communism firmly back on the agenda. However, the revolutionary forces to bring it about that Marx envisaged have not materialized. Today the working class is not the revolutionary force that Marx and earlier socialists believed it would become, nor is there any other group that can credibly be said to have taken its place. Communism seems a distant prospect. This is the problem that is now facing Marxists and other radical opponents of the present system, and it is the problem to which the philosophers I am now discussing are responding.

It is sometimes argued that traditional Marxism is looking in the wrong place for the agents of social change. Today they are no longer the industrial working class in whom Marx put his faith. Rather they will be what Hardt and Negri (2000) call the 'multitude' – the huge mass of people who are dispossessed and oppressed.

However, the 'multitude' are scattered and unorganized; they do not constitute an effective political, let alone revolutionary, force. They may suddenly revolt, like the students in May '68; but they can just as quickly disappear. For a genuine revolutionary force something more united and enduring is required.

Where might this come from? I believe that Marx was right to argue that class is the main dimension of social division in capitalist society, and this remains true today. Capitalism is still a class divided system, and the main classes that make it up are still, as they were in Marx's time, the bourgeoisie and the working class. However, Marx describes capitalism as it was 150 years ago, and it has changed in many ways.

Capitalism is now a global system. Both the bourgeoisie and the working class are very different. The industrial proletariat of the nineteenth century that Marx described is much diminished – and it is now located mainly in China and India and other such countries. The working class as it exists today – particularly in Western societies – is much more diverse, fragmented and dispersed. It is to be found not only in factories and mines, but also in offices, shops, in hospitals and care homes, in distribution and call centres.

That is not necessarily to say that Marxism no longer applies. It does mean, however, that Marxist social and political analysis needs to be rethought fundamentally to take account of these changes. I have no clear or easy theories to propose at this point. I do not know where the political forces that might overthrow capitalism may come from or how they will arise.

Of course, some do indeed say that Marx's theory has been refuted, and that capitalism is the final stage of historical development, the 'end of history'. If no forces emerge to challenge capitalism and create a new world, then the idea of communism will indeed be refuted and Marxism discredited.

But there is no good reason to believe that this will be the case. Marx was surely right to argue that capitalism is not the 'end of history', but only a limited historical stage. The capitalist world is still riven by the contradictions that Marx describes, and these will surely lead eventually to the emergence of forces that will abolish it and create a more socialist form of society.

I cannot *prove* or *demonstrate* this, in that I cannot point to the agents who are needed if this alternative is to be created. It is, therefore, ultimately a matter of *faith*: faith in communism. This is the language that Badiou uses as well. He talks of maintaining 'fidelity to the event' of communism, and of making a Pascalian 'wager' on the communist idea. Following Goldman 1964 he invokes Pascal. 'We must wager! Badiou appropriates Pascal's injunction: we must 'wager on a communist politics' because 'we will never be able to deduce it from capital' (Bensaïd 2004).⁶ And there are good reasons for describing things in this way. As we have seen in recent years, economic crisis alone will not bring about a fundamental change to the system – the agents who will overthrow it and create a new form of society must also exist, and there is no present sign of them. To continue to adhere to the idea of revolutionary change in these circumstances does therefore involve an element of faith.

But this is not the mere blind faith implied by Badiou's notion of a sudden revolutionary 'event' and his dematerialised 'idea of communism'. The faith involved in Marxism is very different. It is the belief that communism is not a mere 'idea' but the actual tendency of history itself. This belief is grounded in the Marxist theory of history and its analysis of the forces at work in capitalism.⁷ We should hang on to this and seek to understand the present situation and where it is leading in terms of it – it is the core of what is valuable in Marxism.

19 November 2015

References

- Althusser, Louis 2006, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain 2001, *Ethics : An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward, London: Verso.
- Badiou, Alain 2010, 'The Idea of Communism', in *The Idea of Communism*, edited by Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, London: Verso: 1-15.
- Badiou, Alain and Peter Engelmann 2015, *Philosophy and the Idea of Communism: Alain Badiou in Conversation with Peter Engelmann*, Cambridge and Malden, MA: Polity.
- Bensaïd, Daniel 2004, 'Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event', in *Think Again, Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward, London and New York: Continuum.
- Blackledge, Paul 2012, *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution*, Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Bosteels, Bruno 2005, 'The Speculative Left', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 104, 4: 751-767.
- de Paula, Patrick Galba 2015, 'Main Interpretations of Marx's Notion of Development: A Critical Review', *Science & Society*, 79, 4: 582-609.
- Dean, Jodi 2012, *The Communist Horizon*, London and New York: Verso.
- Douzinas, Costas and Slavoj Žižek (ed.) 2010, *The Idea of Communism*, London and New York: Verso.
- Engels, Frederick 1958, 'Socialism: Utopian and Scientific', in *Marx-Engels Selected Works in Two Volumes*, II, Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House: 93-155.
- Engels, Frederick 1964, *Dialectics of Nature*, trans. Clemens Dutt, Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Goldmann, Lucien 1964, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine*, trans. P. Thody, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri 2000, *Empire*, Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1969, *Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, London: Allen and Unwin.
- Hegel, G.W.F. 1977, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Landa, Ishay 2013, 'True Requirements or the Requirements of Truth? The Nietzschean Communism of Alain Badiou', *International Critical Thought*, 3, 4: 424-443.
- Marx, Karl 1973, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in *Surveys from Exile*, Harmondsworth: Penguin: 143-249.
- Marx, Karl 1978, 'Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, New York: W.W. Norton, 2nd edn: 3-6.
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels 1970, *The German Ideology Part I*, New York: International Publishers.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels 1978, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party', in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, New York: W.W. Norton, 2nd edn: 473-500.
- Sayers, Sean 1999, 'Review of James D. White, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*', *Historical Materialism*, 5: 359-366.

- Sayers, Sean 2001, 'The Importance of Hegel for Marx: Reply to Zarembka', *Historical Materialism*, 8: 367-372.
- White, James D. 1996, *Karl Marx and the Intellectual Origins of Dialectical Materialism*, London: Macmillan.
- Zarembka, Paul 2001, 'The Declining Importance of Hegel for Marx: James D. White's Provocative Work', *Historical Materialism*, 8: 355-365.
- Žižek, Slavoj (ed.) 2013, *The Idea of Communism 2: The New York Conference*, London and New York: Verso.

Notes

¹ Douzinas and Žižek 2010, Badiou 2010, Žižek 2013, Bosteels 2005, Dean 2012, Badiou and Engelmann 2015.

² For example, Plato's *Republic*, nineteenth century utopian socialists such as Owen, Fourier, Cabet, and some contemporary anarchists and greens.

³ See references above, note 1.

⁴ This way of thinking is at the basis of Marx's account of revolutionary transition in the account of historical materialism in his 1859 Preface (Marx 1978, 4-5).

⁵ 'The alterations of being in general are not only the transition of one magnitude into another, but a transition from quality into quantity and vice-versa, a becoming-other which is an interruption of gradualness, and the production of something qualitatively different from the reality which preceded it.' (Hegel 1969, 369-70)

⁶ From a different political perspective, Paul Blackledge (2012, 142) arrives at a strikingly similar position: 'Marxism involves not a deterministic prediction of the socialist future of humanity but rather a wager on the revolutionary potential of the proletariat.'

⁷ I am very grateful to Meade McCloughan and to the participants in the discussion conducted on academia.edu for comments and criticisms on earlier drafts of this article.