

The Communist Horizon

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The Second Former-West Research Congress invites us to think with the idea of horizon. In keeping with its provocative temporalization of the West—rather than present the West, too, passes in 1989—the invitation construes our horizon as a temporal one, a future toward which we once aspired. This lost horizon, then, connotes privation, depletion, the loss of projects, goals, and utopias that oriented us toward the future. In the wake of this loss, we are asked to consider whether another world is possible, another horizon imaginable.

I initially understood the term “horizon” in a more mundane, spatial fashion, as the line dividing the visible, separating earth from sky. I like to pretend that I had in mind the cool, astrophysics notion of an event horizon. The event horizon surrounds a black hole, a singularity—it’s the boundary beyond which events cannot escape. While the event horizon denotes the curvature in space/time effected by a singularity, it’s not that much different from the spatial horizon: both evoke a line demarcating a fundamental division, that we experience as impossible to reach, and thus that we can neither escape nor cross (although an external observer could see us cross it). “Horizon,” then, tags not a lost future but a dimension of experience we can never lose, even if, lost in a fog or focused on our feet, we fail to see it. The horizon is Real not just in the sense of *impossible*—we can never reach it—but also in the sense of the *actual* format, condition, and shape of our setting (and I take both these senses of Real to Lacanian). We can lose our bearings, but the horizon is a necessary condition or shaping of our actuality. Whether the effect of a singularity or the meeting of earth and sky, the horizon is the fundamental division establishing where we are.

With respect to politics, the necessary and unavoidable horizon that conditions and curves our experience is communism. I first heard the term “communist horizon” from Bruno Bosteels, in a paper he gave in Rotterdam this past summer. He was quoting Alvaro García Linera, the Vice President of Bolivia. Linera gestures to the “communist horizon,” not explaining it or developing the idea but assuming it as an irreducible feature of our setting.

We might be tempted to think of this communist horizon as a lost horizon, to adopt capitalist and liberal-democratic rhetoric about the communism. This would be a mistake, a mistake that capitalists, conservatives, and even some liberal-democrats *don't* make insofar as they see the threat of communism everywhere, twenty years after its ostensible demise. (Those who suspect that the inclusion of liberal democrats in a set with capitalists and conservatives is illegitimate probably are democrats. To determine whether they belong in the set of those who fear communism, they should ask themselves whether they think any evocation of communism should come with qualifications, apologies, condemnations of past excesses. If the answer is yes, then we have a clear indication that liberal democrats, and probably radical democrats as well, still consider communism a threat and so belong in a set with capitalists and concerns. They all are anxious about the forces the desire for communism risks unleashing.)

The communist horizon isn't lost. It is Real. To think further about how this communist horizon manifests itself to us today, how we feel its force, how it formats our setting, I treat communism as a tag for five features of our conjuncture: 1. a specific state formation that collapsed in 1989; 2. a present, increasingly powerful, force; 3. the sovereignty of the people; 4. the force of the common and commons; 5. the actuality of revolution.

1. Communism: the Soviet system

It's safe to say that for people in the US, the most banal, conventional, everyday referent of communism is the Soviet Union. To say this, though, is to start complicating matters. The Soviet Union did not claim to have achieved communism although its ruling party did call itself a communist party. As is the case with any party or political system, the communist party in the Soviet Union changed over time, moving from a revolutionary party to a governing bureaucratic party, a governing bureaucratic party that also experienced changes over time, changes that were sometimes violent, sometimes incremental. Insofar as it was a political party, and for most of its history the only recognized political party, the communist party in the former Soviet Union was a locus of struggle and disagreement over a host of issues from art, literature, and science to economic development, foreign policy, and internal relations among the various republics. To be sure, efforts were made to present a unified front, to downplay the presence of disagreements within the party. Yet a significant effect of these efforts was the amplification of ostensibly superficial differences: small divergences became signs of deeper conflict. In short, my point here is that Soviet Union isn't a very stable referent of communism.

Accordingly, it tends to be stabilized via the proper name of Stalin, where "Stalinist" tags practices of monopolizing and consolidating power in the state-party bureaucracy. Communism as Stalinism, then, is marked by authoritarianism, prison camps, and the inadmissibility of criticism. It also tends to eclipse post-Stalinist developments in the Soviet Union, particularly with regard to successes in modernizing and improving overall standards of living.

In the US, two interlocking stories of the collapse of communism predominate. The first is that communism collapsed under its own weight: it was so inefficient, people were so miserable, life was so stagnant, that the system came to a grinding halt. It failed. The images accompanying

this story are black and white. They feature unhappy, unfashionable people standing in long lines in front of empty stores or walking along enormous, impersonal streets of large, decaying, blocks of apartment buildings. The second, related, story of the collapse of communism is that it was defeated. We beat them. We won. Capitalism and liberal democracy (the elision is necessary) demonstrated their superiority on the world historical stage. Freedom triumphed over tyranny. The details of this victory matter less than its ostensible undeniability. After all, there is no Soviet Union anymore. The accompanying images are color video clips of American soldiers marching in Red Square and rich, thin women with arm loads of shopping bags from exclusive designer stores getting in or out of shiny black limousines.

If the end of the Soviet Union were the same as the end of communism, if 1989 marked a temporal horizon separating the time of the Soviets from the present, then communism would be past—like the Roman or the Ottoman empire. As a particular political formation, it would be an artifact to be analyzed and studied. Whatever gave it breath, made it real, would be gone. It would be a dead political language.

Yet communism persists. It's frequently evoked as a living presence or possibility.

2. Communism: a present force

If we associate communism with the Soviet Union, then communism is evoked descriptively. Russia, Poland, the Czech Republic—they tend to be called “post-Soviet” rather than “new-capitalist” (former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld tried calling them “New Europe,” but that didn't take). For a while, particularly during the early years of privatization, the term “Mafioso capitalism” was heard a lot. But not so much since the nineties, as if Mafioso capitalism hit too close to home, as if it described neoliberalism's brutal, extreme, winner-take-

all version of capitalism rather than a mode of transition out of state socialism. So rather than tied to their proper names, the countries of the former East bloc continue to be tied to their communist experience. We should add here that this tie is enhanced by the continued existence of communist parties, people who grew up under real existing socialism, and people who gather and march under the red flag. For the thousands who marched in Moscow as communists last May, communism remains the alternative to the inequality, unemployment, and racism accompanying globalized neoliberal capitalism.

In the US, “communism” is used as a term of opprobrium so frequently that one would think the Cold War never ended. What is communist? National healthcare. Environmentalism. Feminism. Public education. Progressive taxation. Paid vacation days. Gun control. Bicycles are a “gate-way drug” to communism. Web 2.0 is communist because it holds out “the seductive promise of individual self-realization” that Karl Marx evoked in “The German Ideology.”¹ Who is communist? Anyone who protested US military aggression in Iraq and Afghanistan, anyone critical of the Bush administration, major Democratic political leaders such as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. And, of course, Barak Obama.

It’s obvious enough that contemporary Democrats are not communists—the Democratic Party did not even attempt to pass a single-payer public health insurance program (instead, people are required to purchase insurance from a private company) and its response to the economic crisis has focused on the finance sector. So the constant evocations of an encroaching communist threat in the US could seem to be a not very creative return to the language of the Cold War and Red Scare, a conservative retreat to a formerly effective rhetoric of fear.

In a recent article in *New Left Review*, Slavoj Zizek emphasized that the ruling ideology today wants us to think that radical change is impossible. This ideology, he says, tells us that it’s

impossible to abolish capitalism, to have a different, non-corrupt instantiation of democracy. In reiterating this message, the dominant ideology attempts to “render invisible the impossible-real of the antagonism that cuts across capitalist societies.”ⁱⁱ I disagree. Zizek’s description might have worked a decade or so ago, but not anymore. In the US, we are reminded daily that radical change is possible, and we are incited to fear it. The threat, or specter, is communism, right-wing radio and blogs scream, and if we don’t do something, we will be under the communist yoke. So the right, even the center, regularly invokes the possibility of radical change and it names that change communism.

And why does it name the change communism? Because the gross inequality ushered in by rampant neoliberalism, let’s call it despotic financialism, is visible, undeniable, and global. Increasing in industrialized countries over the last three decades, income inequality is particularly severe in Mexico, Turkey, and the US, the three industrialized countries with the largest income gaps—the income of the richest is 25 times that of the poorest in Mexico, 17 times that of the poorest in Turkey, and 16 times that of the poorest in the US, according to a 2008 report.ⁱⁱⁱ The antagonism that cuts across capitalist countries is increasingly apparent; dominant ideological forces can’t obscure it. So they name it and they name it communism.

Typically, the US has positioned extreme inequality, indebtedness, and decay elsewhere, off-shore. The economic recession, collapse in the housing and mortgage markets, increase in permanent involuntary unemployment, and trillion dollar bank bailouts have made what we thought was the *third world* into *our world*. Contra Zizek, the division cutting across capitalist societies is in fact *more visible, more palpable*, in the US *now* than it’s been since at least the 1920s: we learn that more of our children live in poverty than at any time in US history, that the wealth of the very, very rich, the top one percent, has dramatically increased while income for

the rest of us has remained stagnant or declined, that many of the foreclosures the banks force on homeowners are meaningless, illegal acts of expropriation (the banks can't document who owns what so they lack the paper necessary to justify foreclosure proceedings). We read of corporations sitting on piles of cash instead of hiring back their laid-off workforce. We see a movie about a twenty-six year old billionaire when cities, counties, and states are slashing public services and foregoing upkeep on infrastructure.

Admittedly, popular media rarely refer to the super rich as the bourgeoisie and the rest of us workers. They are more likely to use terms like “Wall Street” versus “Main Street.” Sometimes, they avoid a direct contrast between two hostile forces, instead juxtaposing bank bonuses (the multi-million dollar salary top off that the finance sector lavishes on its traders and executives) with strapped consumers looking for bargains or cutting back on spending. Or they report lists of billionaires—more in 2010 than in 2009 (although the rest of us were less well off); the richest one in Mexico (Carlos Slim), knocking US billionaires Bill Gates and Warren Buffet out of their top position; 28 billionaires in Turkey.^{iv} In a culture where the mantra for over fifty years has been “what’s good for business is good for America” and where since the presidency of Ronald Reagan we’ve been urged to believe that inequality is good because what benefits the rich trickles down to the rest of us, the current undeniability of division isn’t nothing. It’s something. Inequality is appearing as a factor, a force, even a crime—and, indeed, various Congressional, investigative, and regulatory bodies have expended energies searching for and identifying specific crimes associated with the finance crisis (for instance, in July Goldman Sachs paid out 550 million dollars to settle a civil suit that the Securities and Exchange Commission brought against it for fraud). They, the rich, the financiers, have more because the rest of us make do with less, a making do which has ensnared us in debts and hence expropriated our futures.

No wonder, then, that we are hearing the name communism again—precisely because the antagonism cutting across capitalist societies is visible, palpable, pressing. The right, even the center, tries to evoke communism as a threat, something to warn against, a terrible past we should all hasten to avoid. But if it was so terrible and if it is in the past, why is it still a threat? Because it is. The right—in its neoliberal and neoconservative guises—realizes that communism is the alternative, the remedy, the answer to our current economic crisis. As David Harvey explains, capitalists these days construe a healthy economy as one that grows about three percent a year. The likelihood of continued three percent annual growth in the world economy, however, is small. This is in part because of the difficulty of reabsorbing the capital surplus. For example, by 2030 it would be necessary to find investment opportunities for three trillion dollars, roughly twice what was needed in 2010).^v The future of capitalism is thus highly uncertain—and, for capitalists, grim.

Neoliberals and neoconservatives evoke the threat of communism because it is Real. So we shouldn't let the media screen deceive us. We shouldn't think that the charge that Obama is a communist and peace is communist fool us into thinking that communism is just an image covering up and distorting the more serious politics of global finance, trade, and currency regulation. That politics is hopeless, a farce, the attempt of financial and economic elites to come to some temporary arrangements conducive to their continued accumulation of capital. Communism, as the name for the end of and the alternative to capitalism, is Real.

I've consider the right's relation to the communist threat. What about the democratic left? Whereas the right treats communism as a present force, the left is bent around the force of loss, that is, the contorted shape it has found itself in as it has forfeited or betrayed the communist ideal.

More specifically, the predominant characteristic of the contemporary left is its frequent claim not to exist. Whereas the right sees left wing threats everywhere, those on the left eschew any use of the term “we,” emphasizing instead their own fragmentation into a multitude of singularities. There are events, moments, projects, demonstrations, blogs, sometimes even affinity groups, but the left doesn’t exist. Not surprisingly, then, in these leftist discussions, there is no left political vision or program, a point that is lamented even as it is generally disconnected from the setting in which it appears, namely, the loss of a left that says “we” and “our” and “us” in the first place. Left melancholics thus whine about the lack of political alternatives when the real political alternative is the one whose loss determines their whining—communism.

The rejection of communism as an ideal shapes the left. Fragmented tributaries and currents, branches and networks of particular projects and partial objects, are the left form of the loss of communism. Some think of this form as an advance. They name it democracy, envisioning struggles on the left specifically as struggles for democracy. In some places, this could make sense, like in the French Revolution, the Haitian Revolution, in struggles against colonialism and imperialism, even in opposition to the authoritarianism of the party-state bureaucracies of the former East. In these instances, to stand for democracy was to stand against an order constituted against democracy. But in parliamentary democracies, for leftists to refer to their goals as a struggle for democracy is strange—it’s not like they are fighting for rights to vote and organize. Democracy is our ambient milieu, the hegemonic form of contemporary politics (which is yet another reason that the right can use communism as a name for what opposes it). For the left to use the language of democracy *now* is thus even stranger, a way of avoiding the fundamental antagonism between the top one percent and the rest of us by acting as if the only thing really missing was participation.

Rather than recognizing that for the left democracy is the form that the loss of communism takes, the form of communism's displacement, radical democrats treat democracy as itself replacing communism (and on this point share the neoliberal position regarding the victory of capitalism). Political repercussions of the loss of communism as a name for left aspirations include a corresponding turn away from militant opposition and toward generalized inclusion as well as an abandonment of tight organizational forms like the party, the council, and the cell in favor of broad, thin, and momentary calls to become aware of an issue and change one's lifestyle. More fundamentally, the repercussion of the sublimation of communism in democratic preoccupations with process and participation democratic is acquiescence to capitalism as the best system for the production and distribution of resources, labor, and goods.

The mistake leftists make when they turn into liberals and democrats is thinking that we are beyond the communist horizon, that democracy replaced communism rather than serving as the contemporary form of communism's displacement. They don't see, can't acknowledge, their own complicity in despotic financialism: if political struggle is always an irreducible dimension of capitalism and capitalism always interlinked with conflict, resistance, accommodation, and demands, then refusals to engage in these struggles, rejections of the terms of these struggles, will affect the form that capitalism takes.

For example, Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello analyze changes in management language from the sixties to the nineties. They document the dismantling of a class based approach to work and the assembling of a new view of work in terms of individual creativity, autonomy, and flexibility. Personal benefits came to outweigh collective action, thereby strengthening the position of employers. The resulting shift of responsibilities from organizations onto individuals undermined previous guarantees of security. The actuality of flexible employment was

precarity—temporary work, subcontracting, project-based employment, multi-tasking, and opportunities contingent on personal networks. The point I want to emphasize is that a primary factor in the changes in capitalism over the past thirty to forty years has been a change in the understanding of work, a change from an emphasis on its class, group, and collective dimension to a view of work as a personal choice, endeavor, and locus of meaning. Individual work displaced work as a common condition, freeing capital from the constraints in encountered when it had to deal with workers as a collective force. If the old slogan was “the people united, can never be defeated,” its new corollary was, “nevertheless, individuals can be accommodated on a case to case basis.”

I’ve argued that for the left democracy is the form the loss of communism takes. Rather than fighting for an ideal, engaging in a struggle in behalf of the rest of us, the left repetitively invokes democracy, calling for what is already there. Left appeals to democracy thus look a lot like the Lacanian notion of drive. For Lacan, drive, like desire, describes the way the subject arranges its enjoyment, *jouissance*. In the economy of desire, enjoyment is what the subject can never reach, what the subject wants but never gets—*oh, that’s not it*. In the economy of drive, enjoyment comes from missing one’s goal; it’s what the subject gets, even if it doesn’t want it. It’s that little extra charge which keeps the subject keeping on. The subject’s repeated yet ever failing efforts to reach its goal become satisfying on their own.

Democracy for the left is drive: our circling around, our missing of a goal, and the satisfaction we attain through this missing. We talk, complain, and protest. We make groups on Facebook. We sign petitions and forward them to everyone in our mailbox. Activity becomes passivity, our stuckness in a circuit, which is then lamented and mourned as the absence of ideas or even the loss of the political itself and then, yet again, routed through a plea for democracy

although it doesn't take a genius to know that the real problem is neoliberal capitalism and its extreme inequality. What leftists call the loss of the political is the fog they muddle around in because they've lost sight of the communist horizon.

To be sure, some contemporary theorists commend drive's sublimation, its substitution of partial objects and the bits of enjoyment accompanying repetitions of a process for the impossible object of desire. Multiple voices in networked and digital media circuits, for example, celebrate communicative capitalism for its provision of opportunities for small victories and momentary pleasures. Millions die in war and poverty, but at least we have the internet. Others admire drive's creative destruction, the way its dissolution of the old is the opening to the new. Of course it is true that at some point doing the same thing over and over shifts from order to chaos. The reiterations that fail to respond to change in their setting themselves change the setting. But this embrace of drive as destruction, like the view of drive as sublimation, treats a feature of our setting as an alternative without drawing the necessary separation: what makes it a feature of a different formation, a different politics, or even a critique?

In the contemporary networks of communicative capitalism, drive is a feedback circuit that captures our best energies. Invigorating communism as a political alternative requires amplifying the collective desire that can cut through these affective networks. Fortunately, that desire is already there.

3. Communism: the sovereignty of the people

I've discussed two ways of thinking about the communist horizon, the past Soviet experiment and the present force. I've described the present force of communism, moreover, via a right-left distinction between threat and loss, a distinction which rests on a common supposition of

democracy. The right thinks communism is a continued threat to democracy; the left is stuck in democratic drive as the actuality of its suppression of communist desire. In each instance, communism names that in opposition to which our current setting is configured, the setting within which despotic financialism unfolds.

Why is communism that name? Because it designates the sovereignty of the people, the rule of the people, and not the people as a whole or a unity but the people as the *rest of us*, those of us whose work, lives, and futures are expropriated, monetized, and speculated on for the financial enjoyment of the few.^{vi}

One way to explore this point is via Michel Foucault's insight into the limitation of sovereign knowledge crucial to economic liberalism. Liberalism's emphasis on the economic activities of individuals shot a hole through sovereignty. It said that there was a natural limit to sovereignty, a limit arising not from the rights of individuals but from a set of natural dynamics and processes that the sovereign could not know. For Condorcet and Adam Smith, Foucault points out, economic man is bound up in a world he can neither predict nor control. Economic man's interest and enjoyment depend on a series of accidents. The unknown actions of one have effects on others in ways none of them can know. Economic man's situation is "therefore doubly involuntary, indefinite, and non-totalizable."^{vii} Yet, and here is the mystery of the invisible hand, in precisely these conditions of collective blindness, each can benefit. In fact, these conditions of collective blindness are *necessary* conditions for each to benefit. Collective benefit can only be secured through the pursuit of individual self-interest. Any attempt to ensure something like the public good is thus doomed to fail. And just as individual economic actors cannot see the whole, neither can the sovereign. A visible hand would be no hand at all; it would be necessarily partial, distorted, and incapable of combining the multitude of economic interests. Liberal political

economy thus announces: “There is no sovereign in economics. There is no economic sovereign.” Economic man “tells the sovereign: You must not. But why must he not? You must not because you cannot. And you cannot in the sense that ‘you are powerless.’ And why are you powerless, why can’t you? You cannot because you do not know, and you do not know because you cannot know.”^{viii}

What sort of sovereignty is this? Foucault doesn’t emphasize it, but we should keep in mind that it’s the sovereignty of the people. The change in what the sovereign can know is set in absolutism’s demise. A certain version of the economy, one first focused on the market and later on a narrow, odd notion of competition, is presented as a barrier to governance, as a limit on what government can know and do. Insofar as the emergence of this limit accompanies the spread of democracy in Europe (the extension of suffrage, the institutionalization of mass parties) it’s a limiting of the people, the rest of us, as an economic force with the will to oversee, guide, direct, and organize economic matters. As Foucault makes clear, the limiting of the people as a common force turns them from active agents of power into a passive population. Here they are active only as individuals, little entrepreneurs or enterprises. What appears as the freedom of the market, then, is a certain foreclosure of the collective power of the people in and as a common. The power that matters, to affect the basic conditions in which they live, is displaced onto an economy that they are told they cannot govern because they cannot know. What do the people get instead? Representative democracy—the form of their passivity.^{ix}

Giorgio Agamben raises (but does not linger on) a similar point. Noting shifts in the referent of the people from all to some, from a mythic, impossible, *all of us* to the division between the privileged and the rest of us, Agamben writes, “It is as if what we call ‘people were in reality not a unitary subject but a dialectical oscillation between two opposite poles: on the one

hand, the set of the People as a whole political body, and, on the other, the subset of the people as a fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies . . .”^x The constitutive division within the people expresses itself in language. The term can refer to an imagined unity of everyone. It can also refer to the less well off, the poor, the workers, the exploited, the majority whose lives and labor are expropriated to benefit the few. To appeal to the people in this second sense is to express and politicize a division between the few and the many, to make the many appear in their need and in their power. But Agamben’s dialectic stops too soon. His oscillates between two positions, but what about a third move, where the needy bodies *are* the political body (sovereign), and then a fourth, where the fact that the needy bodies *are* the political body makes the impossibility of totalizing or enclosing the political as a body appear?

Even without these additional moves, Agamben’s language confounds the reading of the division in the people I suggest. He splices together different images of division. That is, Agamben refers to two opposite poles and to a unified whole and what is excluded from it. A division between opposite poles is a division within a field (we could even say a field characterized by extension and without necessary boundaries). A division between a whole and what’s outside it displaces this internal division, thereby rendering the open field into a unitary body. The political problem thus shifts from an opposition within the people, between exploiters and the exploited, to one of being excluded from the people. The political solution then appears as inclusion and the initial matter of division and opposition within the people is effaced. In the words of Boltanski and Chiapello, the political situation of the people has become a “topic of sentiment” rather than a “topic of denunciation.”^{xi} As a topic of sentiment, their situation is an individualized misfortune about which one should be indignant. As a topic of denunciation, it results from “a social asymmetry from which some people profit to the detriment of others.”^{xii}

A better way to conceive the division within the people, one capable of expressing the power of the people in and as a common but not a whole and not a unity, makes use of the distinction between desire and drive. The people as desiring have needs, needs they can only address together, collectively, as an active common. The people as caught in drive are fragmented, dispersed into networks and tributaries. Stuck in drive's repetitive loops, they pursue their separate enterprises even as they are governmentalized objects, a population.

I raise the criticism of Agamben not only as a way to get at a view of communism as the force of the people as sovereign in the economy. I also want to emphasize that for communists the binary inclusion/exclusion does not indicate the primary axis of justice (although it functions quite nicely for liberal democrats who insist that the true political issue is making sure that no one is excluded from opportunities to participate in the democratic process or from the possibility of striking it rich in the capitalist market). The remedy for those without papers, for example, is to have papers—and thus membership in the state. This isn't a bad goal, but it is a goal that extends rather than takes or changes state power. The remedy for those without property (slum dwellers, say), is a right to property, a remedy that incorporates the owner into the official market economy, in effect eliminating the threat to the market that uncounted use and exchange pose. But is capitalism best understood as a system that constitutively excludes persons or one that constitutively exploits them?

Building from Alain Badiou and Jacques Ranciere, Zizek claims that the antagonism between the included and the excluded *is* the fundamental antagonism rupturing capitalism today (and hence crucial to the idea of communism). Zizek recognizes that the focus on exclusion easily elides with “the liberal-tolerant-multicultural topic of ‘openness’ . . . at the expense of a

properly Marxist notion of social antagonism.”^{xiii} Yet he argues that the inclusion of the proletariat is an inclusion of a different sort, an inclusion of the capitalism’s point of symptomatic exclusion (“part of no part”) that effectively dismantles it.

A lot rides on the notion of “proletariat” here, especially insofar as contemporary capitalism relies on communication as a productive force, rather than industrial labor. On the one hand, Žižek detaches “proletarian” from the factory, treating “proletarianization” as a process that deprives humans of their “substance” and reduces them to pure subjects. On the other, he identifies exclusion as a particular kind of proletarianization, one by which some are made directly to embody “substanceless subjectivity.” They are the material remainders of the system, its unavoidable and necessary byproducts. Because the entire system relies on their exclusion (or their inclusion as remainders), because they embody the truth that capitalism produces human refuse, surplus populations with no role or function, to include them would destroy the system itself.

Žižek’s argument is compelling as it echoes and reinforces current sentiments around vulnerability, exposure, and bare life. That proletarianization is a process disconnected from industrial labor makes it feel unleashed, as if any one of us at any moment were at risk. That some in particular embody our substanceless subjectivity is, in a way, a relief, *I’m okay*. Their specific vulnerability thus frees me to a kind of engaged generosity or care. *Of course, I want to include them, maybe as recipients of charity, or even through new worker training programs or short term extensions of credit.* To be sure, this isn’t what Žižek has in mind, but the fluidity of the category of the excluded, the vagueness around exactly what they are excluded from and in what way, and fuzziness of the meaning of inclusion in a global economic system he himself terms “Real” make his argument more affectively than analytically satisfying.

Part of the difficulty stems from treating contemporary communicative capitalism as if it were a whole marked by a constitutive exclusion where that exclusion designates persons as a part of no part. As Boltanski and Chiapello (and numerous others) outline, the inclusion/exclusion binary today designates a relation not to a whole but to a network. The excluded are those who are vulnerable because they are disconnected, they lack links to networks of opportunity, security, sustenance. If one thinks in terms of a network model, then, there are no symptomatic points. There are just more links. Links can be added or dropped with little impact on the network form. To be sure, this isn't entirely true: networks can experience overload, instances of self-organized criticality when they disintegrate and collapse. But an image of network overload is not the same as that of a whole and its constitutive exclusion, particularly insofar as networks can often route around breakdowns.

Zizek's treatment of the proletariat in terms of a part of no-part or symptomatic torsion of a system is a component of a larger endeavor to rethink the idea of communism today. Marxists have long identified the proletariat as the universal class, the subject-object of history. In communicative capitalism, the idea of the subject-object of history combines better with feedback loops, self-organized networks, and emergent formations where we are bringing ourselves into being as something new, where we are the objects of our work. We are already configuring our setting. The point is to do it differently, not for the enrichment of the few.

4. Communism: the force of the common and commons

For a couple of decades now, many of us have been making something else together. We've been linking and connecting, doing more than forwarding kitten photos. We've been building alliances and awareness, sharing knowledge of crimes, inequalities, violence, and exploitation.

We've seen the right claiming their revolution and we've been swept up in the reality of their counter-revolution. We've heard the neoliberals and financial despots claim that they are entitled to 90 percent of the wealth. We know, and because we are interconnected we know that we know, that they are wrong. It is not theirs to own.

A crucial aspect of contemporary struggle thus relies on the assertion of the commons against claims to private ownership—a point some claim is justification enough for the renewal of communism. Theorizing the commons is tricky, though, because contemporary capitalism is communicative, an argument Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri make in *Empire*. Capitalist productivity derives from its expropriation and exploitation of communicative processes. Cesare Casarino's distinction between the *common* and the *commons* is helpful here.

For Casarino, the *common* is another name for the self-reproducing excess that is capitalism. It is another name, but it is not the same exactly the same thing. The common is not a thing or an attribute; it is a dynamic process. It is production. Glossing Hardt and Negri, Casarino writes, “nowadays the common is virtually indistinguishable from that which continually captures it, namely, capital understood as a fully—that is, intensively and extensively—global network of social relations.” The idea becomes clearer in contradistinction to the *commons*. The commons is *finite* and characterized by *scarcity*. In contrast, the common is *infinite* and characterized by *surplus*. The common thus designates and takes the place of labor power (Marx's source of surplus value), now reconceived in the broadest possible terms of the potential of creativity, thought, knowledge, and communication as themselves always plural, open, and productive.

How does the move from commons to common help us understand exploitation and expropriation in contemporary capitalism? Well, at least one of the problems with the expropriation of the *commons* is that a few get a lot and some are left with nothing, thus having

to sell their labor power. Privatization leaves them deprived of what they had. The widespread extension of credit—whether in the form of high interest credit cards, mortgage refinancing, or leverage in investment banking—is a kind of privatization of the future as it deprives the indebted of what they will have. The situation with the *common* is different. There is expropriation, but an expropriation that does not appear to leave many with little. There is more than enough, perhaps even too much. A question for the capture of the common in communicative capitalism, then, is the crime or harm: if there is abundance or surplus why is expropriation a problem? Or is the problem some kind of exploitation and if so what kind?

Although I can't go into the variety of contemporary instances of expropriation and exploitation of the communicative common here, one version is worth nothing as an iteration of the division within the people, an iteration that exposes this division as a matter of exploitation rather than exclusion. I call this network exploitation. It involves the basic structure of complex networks (networks characterized by free choice, growth, and preferential attachment; examples include academic citation networks, blockbuster movies, best-sellers, the popularity of blogs and websites). As Albert-Laszlo Barabasi explains, complex networks follow a powerlaw distribution. The item in first place or at the top has much more than the one in second place, which has more than the third one and so on such that there is very little difference between items “at the bottom” but massive differences between the top and the bottom. Popular media express the idea as the 80/20 rule, the winner-take-all or winner-take-most character of the new economy, and the “long tail.” So lots of novels are written, few are published, fewer are sold, a very few become best-sellers. Or lots of articles are written; few are read; the same 4 are cited by everybody. In these examples, the common designates the general field out of which the one emerges. Exploitation consists in efforts to stimulate the creative production of the field in the

interest of finding, and then monetizing, the one. Expanding the field produces the one (or, hubs are an immanent property of complex networks). Such exploitation contributes to the expropriation of opportunities for income and paid labor, as we've seen in the collapse of print journalism and academic presses.

At any rate, the basic idea here is that exploitation occurs not through the surplus value generated through the specific sale and use of labor power but through the incitement of communication and the mobilization of networks in order to produce the one. We should be clear here: this isn't competition in the old political economy sense of pressures that discipline buyers and seller or the classical economy sense of the equilibrium of supply and demand. It's not even competition in the sense of games, contests, and rivalries. It's an arrangement of strength and chance for the emergence of the one.

The instability of the distinction between common and commons also indexes exploitation in communicative capitalism. Two pertinent examples can be tagged "attention" and "spectacle."

The myriad entertainments and diversions available on-line, or as apps on our iphones, are not free. We don't usually pay money directly for Gmail, YouTube, Facebook, or Twitter. These don't cost money. They cost time. It takes time to post and write and time to read and respond. We pay with our attention.

Our attention isn't boundless. Our time is finite—even as we try to extract value out of every second (we don't have time to waste). We cannot respond to every utterance, click on every link, read every post. We have to choose even as the possibility of something else, something wonderful, lures us to search and linger. Demands on our attention, injunctions for us to communicate, participate, share—ever shriller and more intense—are like so many speed-ups

on the production line, attempts to extract from us whatever bit of mindshare is left. When we do respond, our contribution is an addition to an already infinite communicative field, a little demand on someone else's attention, a little incitement of an affective response, a digital trace that can be stored—and on and on and on. We pay with attention and the cost is focus.

This cost is particularly high for left political movements. Competition for attention—how do we get our message across—in a rich, tumultuous media environment too often and easily means adapting to this environment and making its dynamic our own, which can result in a shift in focus from doing to appearing, that is to say, a shift toward thinking in terms of getting attention in the 24/7 media cycle and away from larger questions of building a political apparatus with duration. Infinite demands on our attention—demands we make on each other and which communicative capitalism captures and amplifies—expropriate political energies of focus, organization, and duration vital to communism as a movement and a struggle. It's no wonder that communicative capitalism is participationist: the more participation in networked media environments, the more traces to hoard and energies to capture or divert.

The limits of attention are not only the limits of individuals (and so can be resolved by distributing labor and crowd-sourcing); they are the limits that make communication as such possible (I'm thinking here of the distinction between signal and noise as well as of the habits, environments, and processes that direct and thereby produce the circumstances of communication). Perhaps we could say that the limit of attention is common. And if this is the case, then the common actualized in contemporary communication networks can function itself as a means of expropriation (which suggests that it could be useful to think about overproduction and over-accumulation of the common as distinctly political problems).

The second example of expropriation and exploitation in communicative capitalism I have in mind is spectacle. In *The Coming Community*, Agamben writes:

The extreme form of the expropriation of the Common is the spectacle, that is, the politics we live in. But this also means that in the spectacle our own linguistic nature comes back to us inverted. This is why (precisely because what is being expropriated is the very possibility of a common good), the violence of the spectacle retains something like a positive possibility that can be used against it.

The specific crime of the spectacle is that it exploits our aspirations for common being and uses them against us. Like networked personal media (which dis- and re-assemble the older spectacle form, now via our own creativity and longing), the spectacle is a form for the expropriation of linguistic being.

Agamben works here from the dilemma expressed by Debord: in the society of the spectacle, ‘the language of real communication has been lost’ and a ‘new common language has yet to be found.’ Debord writes:

Spectacular consumption preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations; in this way, the spectacle’s cultural sector gives over expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality—*the communication of the incommunicable*.

Agamben’s response to the expropriation of communicativity Debord identifies is to turn the problem into the solution, that is, to find in the spectacle ‘a positive possibility that can be used against it.’ Communication of the incommunicable dissolves the gap between the language lost and the language to be found. The incommunicable can be communicated. Insofar as it is common, it persists beyond even the most extreme attempts at its expropriation. The spectacle

thus contains its own overcoming. The expropriation of language in the spectacle opens up a new experience of language and linguistic being: ‘not this or that content of language, but language *itself*, not this or that true proposition, but the very fact that one speaks.’ Failure to communicate provides its own satisfaction, the enjoyment of language itself.

Agamben treats communication reflexively: he turns from *what* is said to *that* something is said. Not only is a negative condition (estrangement from linguistic being) treated as a positive opening (new experience of belonging), but its positivity is a result of reflexivity. Language turns on *itself*. In his discussion of drive as precisely this turning round upon the self, Freud views it as a change from activity to passivity. The active aim, to say something, is replaced by the passive aim, to have said. The movement from commons to common repeats, in a way, this shift from active to passive or, the movement from desire to drive. The force of scarcity that characterizes the *commons* pushes action, decision, a choice for this rather than that. The excess, the surplus common, suggest a field or milieu wherein activity has become passivity, a mode of capture or entrapment in the “not yet” or “could have been” or “perhaps” rather than the “make it so.” Blogs, Facebook, YouTube—they each and together take our ensemble of actions and return them to us as an endless communicative common. Rather than “I make,” there is production, a production of thoughts and affects, opinions and contributions that circulate, accumulate, and distract. Words were spoken.

Agamben’s answer to the expropriation of the common is drive. The communist answer is desire, a desire already manifest in our active linking and adding and making, our creating and contributing without pay, just for ourselves and for each other.

5. Communism: the actuality of revolution

I've talked about the communism as a loss and force and the force of loss. I've talked about it as a power and the commons and a common power. I want to close with a Leninist theme, the actuality of revolution.

One of my initial inclinations was to associate the idea of the horizon with the Derridean notion of democracy to come. Democracy, in this conception, can never fully arrive. It is forever postponed, deferred, to come. That democracy cannot be realized is ostensibly a strength as it keeps open the possibility of deconstruction and the new. So conceived democracy relies on a sort of gap that holds open a promise not to totalize, not to terrorize, a promise or commitment to futurity and the unknown. Any given decision or act will necessarily be lacking, but this very lack is the opening democracy demands.

In contrast with such an openness, the Leninist party appears as a specter of horror, as the remnant or trace of the failed revolution the terrors of which must be avoided at all costs. In such a vision (which may not be concretely held by anyone but seems vaguely intuited by most), communism is reduced not simply to the actual (which is always necessarily ruptured, incomplete, irreducible to itself, and pregnant with the unrealized potentials of the past) but to the parody of one actuality, an actuality that itself has changed over time and from different perspectives. In such a reduction (which is an ongoing process), actuality is displaced by an impossible figure, a figure so resolute as to be incapable of revolutionary change.

What is the actuality of revolution? At the minimum we can say that it involves change, confusion, disturbance, chaos, and the possibility wherein tendencies in one direction can suddenly move in a completely opposite direction. As Georg Lukacs makes clear, for the Leninist party, the actuality of revolution requires discipline and preparation, not because the

party can accurately predict everything that will occur, because it cannot, and not because it has an infallible theory, which it does not. Discipline and preparation are necessary in order to adapt to the circumstances. The party has to be consistent and flexible because revolution is chaotic.

The actuality of revolution, then, is kind of enabling impediment. It is a condition of constitutive non-knowledge for which the party can prepare. It's a condition that demands response, if the party is to be accountable to the people, if it is to function as a communist party.

The difference between actuality and futurity (or the perpetual displacement of democracy into an impossible future), then, is a difference in preparation, discipline, responsiveness, and planning. The former requires it, the latter seems to eschew it or postpone it. For the Leninist party, to postpone is to fail now.

The actuality of revolution means that one cannot perpetually defer a decision, action, or judgment. It means that one undertakes it, fully exposed to one's lack of coverage in history or even in the chaotic, revolutionary moment. It means that one has to trust that the revolutionary process will bring about new constellations, arrangements, skills, convictions, that through it we will make something else, something we aren't imagining now.

The actuality of revolution is the press/pressure that we feel, that we can't put off but must redirect. The communist horizon is what we must focus on and use as a guide if this redirection is compelled by the force of the common rather than the speculation of the few.

ⁱ Andrew Keen writing in *The Weekly Standard*, remediated at <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2006/02/15/opinion/main1320641.shtml?tag=contentMain;contentBody>

ⁱⁱ Zizek remediated at Counterpunch: <http://www.counterpunch.org/zizek10152010.html>

ⁱⁱⁱ OECD report 2008 <http://www.globalissues.org/article/4/poverty-around-the-world>

^{iv} <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=0311084931708-2010-03-11>

^v Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital* 216

^{vi} Consider possible expansion: I offer the term “the rest of us” as an alternative to some of the other ways of designating the people of politics such as proletarians, multitude, the part-of-no part. The benefit of “proletarian” is the way it links an essential role in production with political radicality—the proletarian is not the same as the worker. The problem, though, is the term’s exclusivity. As communists argued for over a century, what about the peasantry? And what about the changes in informationalized, post-Fordist, distributed, work? This question links to the second alternative, “Multitude,” which has the opposite problem of proletarian. “Multitude” includes too much, everyone in fact, and the cost of this inclusion is antagonism. Rather than poor against rich, haves against have nots, the many against the few, we have the multitude of singularities combining and recombining in mobile, fluid communicative and affective networks. So “Multitude” fits better with production under communicative capitalism than “proletarian,” but it fits too well and fails to express division. Jacques Ranciere’s term, the part-of-no-part is similarly over-inclusive. Worse, it relies on an underlying logic of inclusion and exclusion rather than division within a field.

^{vii} Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, (2008: 278).

^{viii} Foucault 283

^{ix} See also Zizek, *First as Tragedy*, 135

^x Agamen 1998 177

^{xi} Boltanski and Chiapello 347

^{xii} Boltanski and Chiapello 354

^{xiii} *First as Tragedy* 100