

Is It Possible to Be Communist Without Marx?

Antonio Negri

Abstract: This paper explores the question of whether it is possible to be communist without Marx. This entails encountering the ontological dimension of communism, that is, the material tenor of this ontology, its residual effectiveness, the desire of human beings to go beyond capital, *and* the reality of the episode of statism.

Keywords: Badiou, communism, Deleuze, Guattari, Marx, statism.

Is it possible to be communist without Marx? Obviously. Notwithstanding I often find myself discussing this issue with comrades and subversive intellectuals from other traditions. This is the case above all in France – and the following considerations essentially concern the situation there. I must nevertheless admit that this discussion often ends up boring me a little. It refers to so many diverse orientations and contradictions, which are rarely pushed to the point at which they could be checked against verifications or experimental solutions. It often remains at the level of rhetorical confrontations that approach practical politics only in the abstract.

The Ontological Construction of the Common

It is true that one sometimes comes face to face with interlocutors that exclude radically the possibility of declaring oneself communist if one is Marxist. Recently, for example, an important scholar – who once, however, developed “Maoist” hypotheses that could not have been more radical – said to me that if we stuck to revolutionary Marxism, which anticipated the “withering away”, or “extinction”, of the state after the proletariat had conquered power (and it is clear that this did not eventuate), then nobody today could declare themselves to be “communist”. I objected that this amounted to saying that Christianity is false because the Last Judgement

did not come about “near in time”, as was announced in the *Apocalypse* of Saint John, and because we have still not seen the “resurrection of the dead”. And I added that, in the era of disenchantment, the coming end of this world, for the Christians, and the crisis of socialist eschatology both seemed, in their ambiguity, to be in the same pretty pass, or better, prey to epistemological injunctions of the same order – and yet these injunctions are completely false. And if communism is also false, it is certainly not because its eschatological hope was not fulfilled: I do not mean that this hope was not actually entailed in the premises of communism, but simply that so many Marxian communist prophecies (or better: theoretical apparatuses) did in fact bear out that today it is impossible, without Marx, to confront the problem of fighting against the slavery of capital. And it is no doubt for this reason that we ought to go back from Christianity to Christ and from communism to Marx.

So? The withering away of the State did not come to pass. In Russia and in China, the State became all-powerful and the *common* was organized (and falsified) in the forms of the *public*: statism thus won out and, under this hegemony, what was imposed was not the common, but a sovereignly centralized bureaucratic capitalism. It seems to me, however, that through the great communist revolutionary experiences of the twentieth century, the ideas of an “absolute democracy” and of a “common” for all humans demonstrated its *possibility*. I understand “absolute democracy” here as a political project that is built beyond the “relative” democracy of the liberal State, and therefore as the sign of a radical revolution against the state, as a practice of resistance and of construction of the “common” against the “public”, and as a refusal of the existing that signals the constitutive power exercised by the class of exploited workers.

Here is where the difference comes in. Whatever the conclusion may have been, communism – the one that found its support in the Marxist hypothesis – was put to the test (even though it nonetheless did not succeed) with a set of practices that were by no means purely aleatory, or transitory. For the practices at issue were *ontological* ones. Asking the question of whether it is possible to be communist without being Marxist means, in the first place, encountering the ontological dimension of communism, which is to say, the material tenor of this ontology, its residual effectiveness, and the irreversibility of this episode in the reality and the desire of human beings. Communism, Marx taught us, is a construction, an ontology; that is to say, it is the construction of a new society on the basis of productive man, or the collective worker, through an action (*agir*) which proves effective insofar as it is oriented toward the *enlargement of being*.

The process of construction came about in a chance-ridden way, and the experience of enlargement was partially realized. That it was defeated does not mean that it is now impossible: on the contrary, the facts show that it is possible. Millions of men and women acted and thought, worked and lived within this possibility. Nobody denies that the era of “real socialism” gave rise to, and was traversed by, horrible excesses. But did they occur to such an extent that they determined a cancelling out of this hope, of this enlargement of being, which was built by realizing the possible and through the power of the revolutionary event? If things had actually happened that way, if the predominant result of the negative, which so terribly marred the course of “real socialism”, had been the destruction of being, the experience of communism would have vanished into thin air, been dispersed into nothingness. But this is not what occurred. The project of “absolute democracy” and the reference to a construction of the “common” have retained their appeal and remain intact in our desire and our will. Does this permanence, this materialism of desire, not provide the proof of the validity of Marx’s thought? Is it not therefore difficult, indeed impossible, to be Marxist without Marx?

To the objection of statism, which, it is alleged, necessarily derives from Marxist practices, we must therefore respond by rearticulating our analysis. We must, that is, assume that the accumulation of being, the advances made towards “absolute democracy”, and the affirmation of freedom and equality, continually traverse and endure blockages, interruptions and catastrophes, but also that this accumulation is stronger than the destructive moments that it may come up against. Such a process has nothing finalist, nothing teleological about it; it has nothing to do with a philosophy of history – nothing of any of that. This accumulation of being, which, assuredly, lives only through the historical course of events, nevertheless is not to be taken as destiny or providence, since it is the result, the intersection, of the thousands and thousands of practices and wills, of transformations and metamorphoses that have constituted subjects. This history – or series of accumulations – is the product of concrete singularities (which history shows us in action) and of productions of subjectivity. We assume them and we describe them *a posteriori*. In the history that we recount nothing is necessary, all is contingent, but all is concluded; all is random but also accomplished. *Nihil factum infectum fieri potest*: would there be no philosophy of history wherever “the living” desired merely to continue to live, and for this reason expressed, from below, an intentional teleology of life? The “will to live” does not resolve the problems and the difficulties of “living”, but it is presented to us in desire as urgency and power of constitution of world. If there are discontinuities, or ruptures, then they are revealed within the historical continuity – which is

always made of rendings, never of progressions, but nor is it globally, ontologically catastrophic. Being can never be totally destroyed.

Another issue: this accumulation of being builds the *common*. The common is not a necessary finality; instead, it constitutes an increase of being, because man desires multiplicity, to establish relations, to be a multitude – unable to tolerate being alone, he suffers, above all, from solitude. In the second place, this accumulation of being should not be taken either as an identity, or as an origin: it is itself a product of diversity, of agreements/contrasts between singularities, the fruit of encounters and confrontations. It is important to underscore here that the common does not present itself as a universal. It can contain and express a universal, but cannot be reduced to one, as it is vaster and more dynamic temporally. The universal is stated of each individual and of everyone together. However, the concept of a self-subsistent individual is contradictory. There are no individualities; there is only a relation of singularities. The common rearranges the set of singularities. Herein the difference between the common and the universal is absolutely central: Spinoza defined it when he contrasted the generic vacuity of the universal and the inconsistency of the individual with the concrete determination of “common notions”. The universal is something that each subject can think in isolation, in solitude; the common, in contrast, is something that each singularity can construct, *ontologically*, based on the fact that everyone is multiple but concretely determined in the multiplicity, in the common relation. The universal is said of the multiple, whereas the common is determined, is constructed through the multiple, and is thereby specified. Universality considers the common as an abstract and immobilizes it in the historical flow; while the common uproots universality from immobility and repetition, and, on the contrary, constructs it in its concreteness.

But all this presupposes ontology. Here, then, is where communism needs Marx – to establish itself in the common, in ontology. And vice versa. Without an historical ontology, there is no communism.

Militant Apparatuses and History

Can you be a communist without being a Marxist? In contrast to French “Maoism”, which never frequented Marx (we will come back to this point), Deleuze and Guattari, for example, were communists without being Marxists, but they were so in an extremely effective manner, to the point that one could speak of Deleuze, *in punctuo mortis*, as the author of a book titled *The Grandeur of Marx*. Deleuze and Guattari constructed the common through collective assemblages and with a methodological materialism. This brought

them close to Marxism, but held them at a distance from classical socialism, and from absolutely every organic ideal of socialism and/or statist ideal of communism. Deleuze and Guattari, of course, still proclaimed to be communists. Why? Because, without being Marxists, they were involved in movements of thought that opened continually onto practice, onto a communist militancy. In particular, their materialism was ontological, and their communism was developed through the *thousand plateaus* of transformative practice. What they lacked was history, positive history, which is so often useful in the production and intelligence of the dynamics of subjectivity (which is an apparatus that, with Foucault, ultimately becomes reintegrated into critical ontology). Sometimes such a history happens, of course, to consist in positivist historiography, but it can also be inscribed within a materialist methodology, without the chronological airs and excessive insistence on events typical of *Historismus*. I insist on the complementarity between materialism and ontology. This is because history – which, from the perspective of classical idealism as much as from that of positivism, was, it must be said, carried over from philosophy, before being diverted towards political or ethical figures that denied the dimension of ontology – can, on the other hand, sometimes be tacitly, but effectively, taken on. This is the case when the apparatuses comprising ontology are particularly strong, as could be seen with Deleuze-Guattari. In reality, it must not be forgotten that Marxism does not live on science alone: the experiences it accrues are developed “in situation”, and it is often made manifest through militant operations.

Things transpire wholly differently when, for example, we bring our problem (communism/Marxism, history/ontology) to bear against the numerous variants of utopian socialism, and, above all, against that of the “Maoist” deviation. In the French experience of “Maoism”, we witnessed the spreading of a sort of “hatred of history”, which – and this was its terrible deficiency – betrayed an extreme malaise whenever it came to defining *political objectives*. In that way, in fact, by evacuating history, it evacuated not only Marxism, but also politics. Paradoxically, here there was a repeat, in an inverted sense, of something that occurred in France when Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre founded the *Annales* school: in the latter instance, Marxism was introduced into philosophical discussion through historiography. And historiography became political.

Things occurred in a similar way for utopian socialism: we must admit that in many of its experiences (outside of its Maoist variants) it actually proposed materialist connections between ontology and history – not always, but often. To keep to the French experience, we need think here only of the formidable contribution made by Henri Lefebvre. The point, then, is to understand if, and to what degree, there sometimes emerge, from this set of

diverse positionings, stances that – in the name of the universality of the proposed political project – are opposed to ontological *praxis*. That is, stances which, for example, either deny the historicity of categories like “original accumulation” and, as a result, endorse a hypothesis of communism as some pure, immediate restoration of the *commons*; or else devalue the productive metamorphoses that configure, variably, the “technical composition” of labour power – which comprises the real materialist production of subjectivity in connection with the relations of production and the productive forces – only to return, radically, the origin of communist protestation to human nature (always equal, *sub formae arithmeticae*), etc. Such obviously amounts to the ambiguous reissuing of idealism in its transcendental figure.

With Jacques Rancière, for example, we have recently seen a pronounced emphasis placed on apparatuses that negate every ontological relation between historical materialism and communism. In fact, his research develops perspectives for worker emancipation in terms of the authenticity of consciousness, and, as a result, it upholds *subjectivity in individualistic terms*, thus barring, prior even to getting started, any possibility of designating as common the production of subjectivity. In addition, emancipatory action is here untied from any historical determination and proclaims its independence from concrete temporality: for Rancière, politics is a paradoxical action which unties the subject from participation in history, society, and institutions, even though in reality, it is not possible to say anything about the political subject without this participation (an inherence that can be radically contradictory). The movement of emancipation – “politics” – is thus stripped of its antagonistic character, not in the abstract but on the concrete terrain of struggles. The determinations of exploitation also become invisible and, simultaneously, the accumulation of enemy power – of the “police” (always present in an indeterminate figure, not *quantitate signata*) – ceases to be a problem. When the discourse of emancipation is not based on ontology, it becomes a utopia, an individual dream, and leaves the state of things intact.

Here we come to the heart of things, to the point at which one wonders whether, since 1968, there has been, in France, any communism linked to Marxism. There certainly has been (and still is) in the two variants of Stalinism and Trotskyism, but the history they take part in is a remote and esoteric one. When, in contrast, we come to the philosophy of 1968, the refusal of Marxism is radical. We are thinking essentially of Badiou’s positions, which have come to enjoy a certain popularity.

A brief point: when, after having taken part in a joint reading of *Das Kapital*, Rancière, in the immediate proximity of 1968, went on to develop a blistering critique of Althusser’s positions, he was fully right to show that

the critique of humanist Marxism (which, in Althusser, only opened up after 1968 onto a critique of Stalinism, and thus occurred with some delay!) contained not only the same intellectualist presuppositions wielded by the “man of the party” but also the structuralist abstraction of “the process without subject”. But from Rancière’s viewpoint should one not be levelling the same critique against Badiou? For Badiou, too, the independence of reason is alone that which, in reality, constitutes the guarantee of truth, and the coherence of ideological autonomy – and it is only under these conditions that the definition of communism is determined. “Is this not”, ask Deleuze and Guattari, “the return, under the guise of the multiple, to an old conception of higher philosophy?”¹ It is therefore difficult to understand in what, for Badiou, the ontological conditions of a subject and the revolutionary rupture actually inhere. For him, in reality, every mass movement is a petit-bourgeois *performance*, every immediate struggle of material or cognitive work, of class or of “social work”, is something that will never ever impact upon the substance of power. No enlargement of the collective capacity of production of proletarian subjects will ever amount to anything other than an enlargement of their subjection to the logic of the system. And, so, the object will never eventuate, and the subject will remain indefinable – that is, unless it is produced by theory, unless it is disciplined, unless it is adjusted to truth and made worthy of the event... beyond political practice, beyond history. Here, however, we have only scratched the surface of what Badiou’s thought holds for us: for him, even if attributed a power of subversion by theory and militant experience, every specifically determined context of struggle seems a pure dreamlike hallucination. To insist, for example, on “constitutive power” would be, for Badiou, to dream of the transformation of an imaginary “natural right” into a revolutionary political power. Only an “event” can save us: an event which remains outside of all subjective existence able to determine it and outside of any strategic pragmatics that might constitute its operation. For Badiou, the *event* (Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, the French Revolution, The Chinese Cultural Revolution, etc.) is always defined *a posteriori*, and therefore constitutes a presupposition and not a product of history. As a result, paradoxically, the revolutionary event exists *without* Jesus, *without* Robespierre, *without* Mao. But, in the absence of an internal logic of evental production, how will one ever be able to distinguish the event from an article of faith? Badiou, in reality, limits himself to repeating the mystical affirmation that the tradition attributes to Tertullian: “*Credo quia absurdum*” – I believe because it is absurd. Here, ontology

1. G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What is philosophy?*, H. Tomlinson and G. Burchell (trans.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 144.

is completely brushed aside. And communist reasoning is reduced to a rush of madness or a *business* of the spirit. In a nutshell, for Badiou, in the words of Deleuze-Guattari, “the event itself appears (or disappears), less as a singularity than as a separated aleatory point that is added or subtracted from the site, within the transcendence of the void or *the* truth as void, without it being possible to decide on the adherence of the event to the situation in which it finds its site (the undecidable). On the other hand, perhaps there is an intervention like a dice throw on the site that qualifies the event and makes it enter into the situation, a power of ‘making’ the event”.

The presuppositions behind these theoretical positions (which, however, set out from an assumed and shared critique of past revolutionary practices) can now be better understood. In fact, the point, in the first place, was to get rid of all references to the history of a “real socialism”, a socialism that, of course, had been defeated, but that was ever full of dogmatic premises and continued to have an organic predisposition to betrayal. In the second place, the point was to avoid establishing any relation between the dynamics of subversive movements and the contents and institutions of capitalist development. The union tradition proposed the performing of just such juggling acts (*insidelagainst*), and this undoubtedly brought about the corruption of revolutionary desire and the illusion of those in struggle. But to conclude from these – perfectly justified – critical objectives that every political attempt – tactical or strategic – to reconstruct a communist practice, with all the efforts that it involves, is foreign to perspectives for liberation; that no constitutive project can be formed, nor any transformative foothold found in the immediately antagonistic and material dimension of struggles; that any attempt to account for current forms of domination, no matter how any such attempt develops, will be ultimately subordinated to, and absorbed by, capitalist command; and, lastly, that any references to struggles internal to the bio-political tissue, and therefore to struggles that consider the structures of *Welfare* from a materialist perspective, represent no more than some vitalist revival – well, all these conclusions can have only one meaning, and that is the negation of class struggle. In addition, according to Badiouian “extremism”, the communist project can be carried out in a privative manner only, inside forms that consist in subtracting themselves from power, and the new community produced only by those without community (as Rancière also maintains). What is shocking about this project is the Jansenist purity that it manifests. Insofar as it considers that every form of intelligence produced in the concrete history of humans can be returned to the logic of the system of capitalist production, then, having been so extensively depreciated all forms of collective intelligence, nothing more can be done. Or, better put, we are simply left to reaffirm the observation

made above: namely, that the materialist pragmatics that Machiavelli and Nietzsche, Spinoza and Deleuze taught us – that is, a movement which holds exclusively for itself; a work which refers back only to its own power; an immanence which is concentrated on action and on the act of production of being – is in any case more communist than any utopia that entertains a schizoid relation with history and formal uncertainties with ontology.

We, therefore, do not believe that it is possible to speak about communism without Marx. Of course, communism is to be profoundly and radically re-read and renewed. But this creative transformation of historical materialism can also be undertaken using indications developed by Marx, as well as by enriching it with those deriving from “alternative” strands of modern thought, from Machiavelli to Spinoza, from Nietzsche to Deleuze-Foucault. If Marx studied the laws of movement of capitalist society, at stake today is to study the *laws* of working-class labour – better still, of *social activity* as a whole – as well as of the production of subjectivity in the framework of society’s subsumption under capital and of the immanence of resistance to the global horizon of exploitation. Today, it is not enough to study the laws of capital, we must work at expressing the power of rebellion of workers – and to do so from all sides. Still following in Marx’s footsteps, what interests us is work not as object but as activity; not as value itself but as the living emergence of value. In contrast to capital, in which the general wealth exists objectively, as reality, work is the general wealth as possibility and is confirmed, as such, in activity. It is therefore by no means contradictory to maintain that “labour is *absolute poverty as object*, on one side, and is, on the other, the *general possibility* of wealth as subject and as activity”.² But how do we proceed in order to grasp work in this way, that is, not as a sociological object, but as a political subject? Such is the problem, the object of inquiry. It is only by resolving *this* problem that we will be able to speak of communism – and if necessary (and it nearly always is) by getting one’s hands dirty. All the rest is intellectualist chatter.

Antonio Negri is the author of many publications including *Empire*, with Michael Hardt (2000); *Time for Revolution* (2003); *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, with Michael Hardt (2004); *Subversive Spinoza: (Un)Contemporary Variations* (2004); *Political Descartes: Reason, Ideology and the Bourgeois Project* (2007); *Goodbye Mr. Socialism, Antonio Negri in Conversation with Raf Valvola Scelsi* (2008); *The Porcelain Workshop: For a New Grammar of Politics* (2008); *In Praise of the Common*, with Cesare Casarino (2009); *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (2009); *Commonwealth*, with Michael Hardt (2009); *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor* (2009).

2. K. Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, M. Nicolaus (trans., and Foreword) (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 296.

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