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21st century Proudhonists?**

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The new communists of the commons: 21st century Proudhonists

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If Proudhonism in the 19th century was, as Marx argued, a petty bourgeois ideology, this paper argues that the new communism of the commons propounded by Badiou, Hardt and Negri and Žižek is a 21st century avatar of it. It speaks not for what Poulantzas called the ‘traditional petty bourgeoisie’, as Proudhon did, but for the ‘new petty bourgeoisie’ of ‘non-productive wage-earners’, which has also lately styled itself the ‘creative class.’ A failure to comprehend the dynamics of capitalist accumulation and a general antipathy to any general organization of labour in society, and thus to any serious politics, are common to both. In addition, the paper shows that the protection of the cultural commons, the core of the project, is but a programme aiming for the continued reproduction of the creative class within capitalism. It is also prey to a series of misunderstandings - of the concept of the commons itself, of contemporary capitalism whose dynamics forms the backdrop of their project and key economic and political ideas of Marx whose authority they seek to attach to their project.

Keywords: commons; idea of communism; creative class; Proudhonism; Marxism

The Great Recession and the financial crisis that broke in its midst appeared at first to have prompted a major break with the neoliberal orthodoxy that was so instrumental in causing them. Governments around the world called for fiscal stimulus, easy monetary policies and massive state intervention, and many were forced to nationalize, support and regulate failing financial institutions. Keynes, whom neoliberalism had so mightily struggled to displace was back, and nowhere with more vengeance than in neoliberalism’s anglo-american heartlands. President Obama confirmed the massive bailouts undertaken by the outgoing Bush Jr administration and announced the heftiest stimulus package in the advanced industrial world while Gordon Brown ‘saved the world’ with his economic diplomacy in favour of fiscal stimuli. But as the crisis wore on, the contingency of the new commitment to Keynesianism (Patnaik 2009a) and a deeper political continuity – of the unbroken power of financial capital over government, particularly in the US and the UK – became clear. The bailouts for banks and austerity for working people further confirmed that neoliberalism, while doctrinally about the free markets and ‘rolling back the state,’ had practically always effected state action in favour of capital, particularly financial capital. It remains less widely appreciated that these continuities are dangerous and contradictory

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for the very forces they benefitted in the past: the combination of austerity and bailouts is prolonging the Great Recession and is almost certain to lead to further financial crises. When they occur, the financial institutions that were too big to fail the last time around will have become too big to bail out by states too indebted to do so.

Why recall all this in a paper about the new communism of the commons? Quite simply because that phenomenon, wherein a group of prominent Western intellectuals on the left has boldly announced an apparently radical return to Communism committed to ‘de-demonizing’ it, is akin to the apparently radical return to Keynesianism by governments and intellectuals who remain committed to the interests of finance.

The publication of Alain Badiou’s *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010), Michael Hardt and Tony Negri’s *Commonwealth* (2009), the conference volume *The Idea of Communism* (2010) and associated publications has been hailed – by the authors themselves – as a major political departure. In the words of Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek, their conference, originally planned for a modest audience of about 180 and then forced to expand to accommodate about 1200,

... opened the way for a reactivation of the strong link between radical philosophy and politics. The massive participation, the amazing buzz that propelled the conference (strangers greeting each other like old friends), the good humoured and non-sectarian question and answer sessions (something rather rare for the left), all indicated that the period of guilt [over Actually Existing Communism, one presumes] was over. If this conference was a major intellectual encounter, it was an even greater political event. (Douzinas and Žižek 2010, ix)

Not to be outdone in self-importance Alain Badiou claimed of the same conference that ‘in addition to the two people behind it (Slavoj Žižek and myself), the great names of the true philosophy of our times (by which I mean a philosophy that is not reducible to academic exercises or support for the ruling order) were strongly represented’ (Badiou 2010, 36).

Prima facie, Badiou’s proposition that the left end the ‘end of ideologies’ (Badiou 2010a, 99) and return to the ‘idea of communism’ after decades of distancing, Hardt and Negri’s proposal that it be associated with the defense of the ‘commons’ – the natural and the cultural worlds we inhabit (Hardt and Negri 2009, vii) – and Slavoj Žižek’s extension of these ideas to include ‘the commons of internal nature’ (e.g. Žižek 2010) as well as the ‘Excluded’, such as slum-dwellers, add up to a very tall political order.

This paper argues, however, that on closer scrutiny this new communism of the commons turns out to be little more than a 21st century avatar of the Proudhonism of the 19th, which Marx exposed as a petty bourgeois ideology, but with one historical difference. 19th century Proudhonism was the ideology of what Poulantzas called the ‘traditional petty bourgeoisie’ of ‘small scale production and ownership, independent craftsmen and traders’ (Poulantzas 1975, 204). The 21st century avatar is the ideology of what he called the new petty bourgeoisie, ‘non-productive wage-earners’ (Poulantzas 1975, 206). This class has since come to be dubbed variously as ‘knowledge workers’, ‘the professional managerial class’, ‘symbolic analysts’ or ‘cognitive workers’ and, last but not least, the ‘creative class’, people ‘who add economic value through their creativity’ (Florida 2002, 68). If, speaking for the 19th century traditional petty bourgeoisie, Proudhon’s socialism tragically sought revolution (Proudhonists dominated the International Working Mens’ Association element in the Paris Commune) if only to protect their class against its particular enemy, large scale capitalism, and proposed measures which assumed its continued existence, the new petty bourgeois new communism is, if anything, worse: an

harum-scarum manifesto, whose apparently radical fingering of large corporations who try to 'privatise the general intellect' (of which, needless to say, the 'creative class' is the embodiment), is not only based on new-fangled and badly tangled ideas about the nature of contemporary capitalism. It stops far short of socialism. Like the reaction of the governing right to the crisis, the new communism of the left is more a symptom of the tension between the crisis-induced realization that the old grooves of thought and practice must be abandoned, and be seen to be abandoned, to retain credibility and relevance, and the inability of these intellectually and politically enervated representatives to actually do so.

For all the incantations and intonations about Marx and Marxism, the new communists continue, as they have over the past many decades, to skirt the core of Marx's work, his critique of political economy. While it is unclear whether they accept the verdict of the majority of those who call themselves 'Marxist economists' that Marx's account of capitalism is plagued by the so-called 'transformation problem' and inconsistent and hence mistaken about the Tendency of the Rate of Profit to Fall (But see Elson 1979, Kliman 2007, Freeman et al 2004, Desai 2010), the new communists' ability to treat it as an inexhaustible source of apparently profound but actually disjointed and mangled ideas is certainly helped by this sort of 'Marxism without Marx' (Freeman 2010). The new communists also falsely pin on classical Marxism a deficiency of political understanding which they profess to make good (for a critique of an earlier attempt at this see Desai 2001). And they fundamentally mis-read the history of communism in the 20th century, largely accepting questionable mainstream, indeed neoliberal accounts of its problems and demise (for a critique and an alternative account see Kotz 1997). Just as the reaction of the right to the crisis betrayed its class character more clearly than was revealed in the free market rhetoric of the past three decades, so the reaction of these new communist intellectuals to the crisis betrays the extent to which the left of the past decades, including many self-proclaimed Marxists, have read into Marx and Communism their own new petty bourgeois concerns. Finally, just as the right's reaction, rather than resolving the crisis and laying a new foundation for growth has, instead, laid one for the next crisis, so the new communists' new found communism is little more than an express train headed for irrelevance. This is already becoming clear in that they have little of import to say to the wave of protest and liberation struggles that are sweeping over the Middle-East, not to mention London or Wisconsin. For though framed by much seemingly radical rhetoric about returning, now unabashedly, to Communism, the new communism embodies little more than the left's failed empty oppositionism, neatly cleft from any politics, of the past several decades. It has been, in effect, the left's capitulation to neoliberalism. As Badiou, brazenly or inadvertently as the case may be, reveals, this was the *real* legacy of May '68, as the new communist intellectuals so Eurocentrically interpret it. For, barring the honourable exceptions, and net of the increases in strictly liberal freedoms for some women and minorities, the chief political results of *their* May '68, which left out of account the powerful anti-imperialist struggles and wars of so many millions in the third world and fondly privileged only their own youthful rebellion, were that as that generation matured and occupied positions of political and economic power, the right moved farther to the right under the banner of the New Right and the left also moved to the right under 'Third Way' banners both on the pretext of increasing liberal freedoms, but actually undermining them too, for most people in the world.

In what follows, I first identify what I consider the main components of the new communism. The critique that follows is but a preliminary, and necessarily compressed, outline. It is founded on a reading of Marx, Marxism and its history that contests the new communists'

deeply problematic and selective appropriation of these. Like the increased demand for *Capital* so widely reported since the crisis began, the hundreds who flocked to the new communists' conference represent a perfectly understandable intellectual hunger for radical ideas in the midst of crisis. However, the adulterated fare offered up by the new communists can hardly satisfy it. It can, however, so long as it is successfully marketed, prevent that hunger from being satiated by the real article. The critique of the new communism begins with a review of the main terms of Marx's criticism of Proudhon: his rejection of the 'general organization of labour in society' which would be indispensable to any communism. It goes on to discuss common Proudhonist and new communist misunderstanding of the state. The rest of the critique of the new communism concentrates on the new features of the new communists' thinking which specifically expresses the interests and self-image of the new petty bourgeoisie or the 'creative class'. They include the confusions surrounding their central category, the commons, the ideas of 'cognitive workers' as 'fixed capital', of rent replacing profit and, finally, Žižek's questionable ideas about the relationship between capitalism and democracy. The paper ends with some reflections on the form of value in communism, the centrality of the state in struggles to achieve it and their likely nature.

The new communism

The proposal with which, it appears, Badiou kicked off the construction of the new communism was that the left should once gain 'subjectivise' itself, not to Communism as such but to the 'Idea' – a 'synthesis of politics, history and ideology' – of Communism (Badiou 2010b, 3, 4). If '[t]he Communist Idea exists only at the border between the individual and the political procedure, as that element of subjectivation that is based on a historical projection of politics', the historical projection of politics on which Badiou's subjectivation is based is revealed in his discussions of May '68, the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the Paris Commune. For all the differences between these three events, Badiou extracts two common themes from his discussions: a rejection of 'statism' and an associated rejection of the party as a revolutionary vehicle.

Indeed, Badiou dismisses all 'democratic politics' as 'nothing more than an eager willingness to service the needs of banks'. Rejecting such 'capitalo-parliamentarism', he calls for a politics that 'is far removed from state power' and surmises that it will 'probably remain so for a long time to come'. But what looks like a deferral of engagement with state power turns out to be a rejection. The 'obligatory refusal of any direct inclusion in the State, of any request for funding from the State, of any participation in elections, etc., is also an infinite task, since the creation of new political truths will always shift the dividing line between Statist, hence historical, facts and the eternal consequences of an event' (Badiou 2010b, 13). Representing 'the new proletarians who have come from Africa and elsewhere and the intellectuals who are the heirs to the political battles of recent decades' (such, one must presume, as himself), such a politics will 'not have any organic relationship with existing parties or the electoral and institutional system that sustains them' (Badiou 2010a, 99). This rejection of state, politics and democracy claims kinship with the Marxist concept of the 'withering away of the state' and rejects 'communism as a goal to be attained through the work of a new State' (Badiou 2010b, 13). Against such a conception of politics, Badiou finds Marx's account of the Paris Commune 'ambiguous':

On the one hand, he [Marx] praises everything that appears to lead to a dissolution of the state and, more sporadically, of the nation-state. In this vein he notes: the Commune's abolition of a professional army in favour of directly arming the people; all the measures it took concerning the election and revocability of civil servants; the end it put to the separation of powers in favour of a decisive and executive function; and of its internationalism (the financial delegate of the Commune was German, the military leaders, Polish, etc.). But on the other hand, he deplores incapacities that are actually statist incapacities [*incapacités étatiques*]: its weak military centralization; its inability to define financial priorities; and, its shortcomings concerning the national question, its address to other cities, what it did and did not say about the war with Prussia and its rallying of provincial masses. (Badiou 2010a, 179)

Badiou notes with satisfaction that 'Engels formalises the Commune's contradictions in the same way' when he showed that the two main political tendencies in the Commune, the Blanquists and the Proudhonists, 'ended up doing exactly the opposite of their manifest ideology' – the Blanquist partisans of centralised and conspiratorial politics had to destroy the state bureaucracy while the Proudhonist opponents of associations had to support large scale workers' associations. To this, Badiou poses the question of 'how would the current that Marx and Engels represented in 1871, and even much later, [would] have been more adequate to the situation' and 'with what extra means would its presumed hegemony have endowed the situation'. Badiou leaves us to imagine the answer, noting only that 'the ambiguity of Marx's account will be carried [*sera levee*] both by the social-democratic disposition and its Leninist radicalization, that is in the fundamental motif of the party, over a century' (Badiou 2010a, 181).

This motif too must be discarded. For Badiou, the Paris Commune 'for the first and to this day only time, broke with the parliamentary destiny of popular and workers' political movements' (Badiou 2010a, 196-7). Though the Cultural Revolution 'bears witness to the impossibility truly and globally to free politics from the framework of the party-state that imprisons it', 'all emancipatory politics' must nevertheless 'put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics "without party"', though without lapsing into anarchism (Badiou 2010a, 155). If the left is 'a set of parliamentary political personnel that proclaim that they are the only ones equipped to bear the general consequences of a singular political movement', it is time to break with it (Badiou 2010a, 198). Indeed, 'a rupture with the representative form of politics' is necessary, even a 'rupture with "democracy"' (Badiou 2010a, 227).

More than ever, political power, as the current economic crisis with its single slogan of 'rescue the banks' clearly proves, is merely an agent of capitalism. Revolutionaries are divided and only weakly organized, broad sectors of working class youth have fallen prey to nihilistic despair, the vast majority of intellectuals are servile. In contrast to all this, though just as isolated as Marx and his friends were at the time when the retrospectively famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party* came out in 1848, there are nonetheless more and more of us involved in organizing new types of political processes among the poor and working masses and in trying to find every possible way to support re-emergent forms of the communist Idea in reality. (Badiou 2010b, 14)

To Badiou's Idea of communism, which claims kinship with Marx and Marxism even as it rejects the principal elements of their politics, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri add the proposal that Communism be conceived as a resistance to the privatization of the 'commons'. They agree with Badiou that the project requires a non-statist and non-party approach. Rejecting

both the ‘collapse theories’ which ‘envision the end of capitalist rule resulting from catastrophic crises, followed by a new economic order that somehow rises whole out of its ashes’ and ‘the notion of socialist transition that foresees a transfer of wealth and control from the private to the public, increasing state regulation, control and management of social production’, Hardt and Negri explain that ‘The kind of transition we are working with ... requires the growing autonomy of the multitude from both private and public control; the metamorphosis of social subjects through education and training in cooperation, communication and organizing social encounters; and thus a progressive accumulation of the common’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, 311). The resistance to the neoliberal privatization of the commons must not assume ‘that the only alternative to the private is the public, that is what is managed and regulated by states and other governmental authorities’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, viii).

For Hardt and Negri, the commons include on the one hand ‘the commonwealth of the material world – the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature’s bounty – which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together’ and ‘those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects and so forth’ (Hardt and Negri 2009, viii). Hardt justifies this new vision of Communism through a re-reading of two passages from Marx’s work, the section on ‘Private Property and Communism’ in the 1844 Paris Manuscripts and one from the final part of *Capital*, volume 1. In the former, Hardt points out, Marx equates Communism with the abolition of private property. For Marx this does not mean extending and generalizing private property to the whole community but rather ‘the abolition of property as such’ (Hardt 2010, 139). Hardt quotes Marx saying ‘Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it’ (Marx 1975, 351) and goes on to ask:

What would it mean for something to be ours when we do not possess it? What would it mean to regard ourselves and our world not as property? Has private property made us so stupid that we cannot see that? *Marx is searching here for the common*. The open access and sharing that characterise use of the common are outside and inimical to property relations. We have been made so stupid that we can only recognize the world as private or public. We have become blind to the common. (Hardt 2010, 139) [Emphasis added]

This search ends, Hardt avers, in *Capital* where Marx speaks of how ‘capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of nature, its own negation... [which] does not re-establish private property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the acquisition of the capitalist era: i.e. on co-operation and the possession in common of the land and of the means of production’ (Marx 1867/1977, 929). For Hardt this means that

Capitalist development inevitably results in the increasingly central role of cooperation and the common, which in turn provides the tools for overthrowing the capitalist mode of production and constitutes the bases for an alternative society and mode of production, a communism of the common. (Hardt 2010, 140)

Important as this is, Hardt argues, this conception ‘grasps primarily the material elements in question’ and these are not ‘the dominant forms of capitalist production today’ (Hardt 2010, 140). But here, the passages from the Paris Manuscripts come to the rescue, highlighting ‘the immaterial, really biopolitical aspects’. Here, Hardt argues, Marx conceives communism as the ‘supersession of private property as human self-estrangement’, as the ‘true appropriation of the human essence through and for man’ and ‘the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e. human, being’. Here appropriation is

... no longer appropriation of the object in the form of private property but appropriation of our own subjectivity, our human, social relations. Marx explains this communist appropriation ... in terms of the human sensorium and the full range of creative and productive powers. 'Man appropriates his integral essence in an integral way', which he explains in terms of 'all his human relations to the world – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, loving'. I think the term 'appropriation' here is misleading because Marx is not talking about capturing something that already exists, but rather creating something new. the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous human production of subjectivity, the human production of humanity... (Hardt 2010, 141)

When Hardt proposes that in such appropriation, 'paradoxically the *object* of production is really a *subject*' and 'the ultimate object of capitalist production is not commodities but social relations or forms of life' (Hardt 2010, 142), he is subscribing to a view of contemporary capitalist production (shared by Žižek and Negri, as we see below) based on conceptions of 'cognitive capitalism', one of a family of diagnoses of contemporary capitalism cognate with 'knowledge economy', 'information society' etc., which claim that capitalism increasingly involves cultural rather than material production. In it, 'the increasing centrality of the common on capitalist production – the production of ideas, affects, social relations and forms of life – are emerging as the conditions and weapons for a communist project' (Hardt 2010, 143). Hardt also subscribes, again in common with Žižek and Negri, that such appropriation puts '[l]iving beings as fixed capital ...at the centre' and involves 'the production of forms of life [which is] becoming the basis of added value' thanks to 'human faculties, competences, knowledges, and affects – those acquired on the job but more importantly those accumulated outside work' which 'are directly productive of value' (Hardt 2010, 141).

Slavoj Žižek stations himself farther to the left of the other new communists, though this turns out to be a largely rhetorical location. He endorses the need to revive the communist Idea because liberal democratic capitalism 'contains antagonisms powerful enough to prevent its indefinite reproduction'. These antagonisms include the corporate invasion of the two commons indentified by Hardt and Negri as well as two more: our genetic heritage, which also needs to be protected against neoliberal privatization and that between the included and the 'Excluded'. The last is particularly important because, Žižek argues, without the 'Excluded', 'the global capitalist system' can 'survive its long term antagonism and simultaneously ... avoid the communist solution' by reinventing 'some kind of socialism – in the guise of communitarianism, populism, capitalism with Asian values, or whatever' and so 'only the reference to the "Excluded" justifies the term communism' (Žižek 2010, 214). Žižek aligns the idea of the 'Excluded' with Badiou's reference to the new proletarians, and proposes a radicalization of the concept of the proletariat 'to an existential level well beyond Marx's imagination', well beyond 'the classic image of proletarians having "nothing to lose but their chains"' to one in which 'we are in danger of losing *everything*'. However, he detracts from Badiou in insisting on the continuing importance of a politics focused on the state, even arguing for a reinstatement of the concept of a dictatorship of the proletariat in which 'the State itself is radically transformed, relying on new forms of popular participation' (Žižek 2010, 220). He also endorses a democratic conception of struggle, Žižek argues that whereas 'till now, capitalism seemed inextricably linked with democracy', '[n]ow ... the link ... has been broken' (Žižek 2010, 221).

The reason lies in the emergence of 'cognitive capitalism' (Vercellone 2008) in which 'exploitation in the classic Marxist sense is no longer possible – which is why it has to be

enforced more and more by direct legal measures, i.e. by non-economic force' (Žižek 2010, 224). In making this case, Žižek refers to an argument of Negri's in which the latter interprets certain passages in the *Grundrisse* to argue that the increasing role of fixed capital in capitalist production, which reflects 'the development of general social knowledge,' leads to a situation in which the fixed capital becomes 'man himself' because the 'productive power of labour' is 'itself the greatest productive power' (Žižek 2010, 222). Once this happens,

... the moment the key component of fixed capital is 'man himself', its 'general social knowledge', the very social foundation of capitalist exploitation is undermined, and the role of capital becomes purely parasitic; with today's global interactive media, creative inventiveness is no longer individual, it is immediately collectivised, part of 'common', such that any attempt to privatise it through copyrighting become problematic – more and more literally, 'property is theft' here. (Žižek 2010, 222)

Žižek agrees with Negri when the latter says that 'the wage epoch is over' and that rather than 'the confrontation between work and capital concerning wages' we are witness to 'the confrontation between the multitude and the state concerning the instauration of the citizen's income' (Žižek 2010, 222). Žižek notes Negri's conclusion from this that the task is 'not [to] abolish capital, but to compel it to recognise the common good, i.e. *one remains within capitalism*' (Žižek 2010, 222, Emphasis added). Žižek, as is his style, also demurs a little, positioning his interlocutor, Negri, as the supplier of merely a 'standard' (dare we say Fordist?) 'post-Hegelian matrix of the productive flux which is always in excess with regard to the totality which tries to subdue and control it'. Against this, Žižek claims to provide something altogether more enticing – post-Fordist, flexibly produced and custom-made, one presumes – a 'parallax shift' in which 'we perceive the capitalist network itself as the true excess over the flow of the productive multitude' (Žižek 2010, 223). However, this appears more an exercise in brand placement than any registration of serious scholarly or intellectual difference. For he has rejoined Negri by the next page in subscribing to Carlo Vercellone's idea that contemporary capitalism is no longer about profit but rent.

The increasing role of the 'general intellect' results, for Žižek, not 'as Marx seems to have expected, [in] the self-dissolution of capitalism, but the transformation of profit into rent on the privatized general intellect' (Žižek 2010, 224-5). As the example of Bill Gates 'who became the richest man on earth within a couple of decades by appropriating the rent received from allowing millions of intellectual workers to participate in that particular form of the "general intellect" that he privatizes and controls', shows workers 'are no longer separated from the objective conditions of their labour' since they own their own computers, for instance, but 'remain cut off from the social field of their work, for the "general intellect" – because the latter is mediated by private capital' (Žižek 2010, 225). What is true of the 'commons of culture' is also true of the 'commons of external nature': contemporary high prices of oil are, according to Žižek, due to the 'rent we pay the owners for this resource because of its scarcity and limited supply' (Žižek 2010, 225). Žižek reads these changes as requiring an emphasis on the state and democratic politics and appears to part company with the other new communists. He argues that there is a

fundamental 'contradiction' of today's 'postmodern' capitalism: while its logic is deregulatory, 'anti-statal', nomadic/deterritorializing, etc., its key tendency towards the 'becoming-rent-of-profit' signals the strengthening role of the State whose (not only) regulatory function is ever more omnipresent. Dynamic de-territorialization coexists with and relies on increasingly authoritarian interventions of the state and its legal and other apparatuses. What can be discerned at the horizon of our historical becoming is thus a

society in which personal libertarianism and hedonism coexist with (and are sustained by) a complex web of regulatory state mechanisms. Far from disappearing, the State is today gaining in strength. (Žižek 2010, 224)

Though Žižek envisages a predominantly political fight against this rent-seeking predatory capitalism, its content belies this. In Žižek's view, the world's working class consists of three groups – those involved in intellectual planning and marketing, material production and the provision of material resources, i.e. intellectual labourers, the old manual working class and the outcasts. Unfortunately they are divided by their adherence to 'enlightened hedonism and liberal multiculturalism, populist fundamentalism and more extreme singular forms'. Overcoming these divisions in a unity 'is already their victory' (Žižek 2010, 226).

The Proudhonism of the New Communists

Marx's critique of Proudhon in *The Poverty of Philosophy* of 1847 and in scattered references throughout his later economic works reveals Proudhon's ideas to be a compendium of the characteristic errors of vulgar political economy arising out of the fetishism of commodities ('He wants to be the synthesis – he is a composite error.' Marx 1847, 107). Unable, in particular, to differentiate between use value and value (or exchange value), he equated utility and value though they were in fact opposed (Marx 1847, 32), assumed that commodity production could be reconciled with 'labour money' (Marx 1947, 172-5 and Marx 1867/1977, 188-9) and took the direct exchangeability of all commodities for granted (Marx 1867/1977, 161). Proudhon's proposals attempted to articulate small producers' interests. However, given that the petty bourgeois have no consistent interests, since they are contradicted on the one hand by those of the capitalists and on the other by any potential socialism, they can only constitute wishful thinking on the part of the petty bourgeois. As Poulantzas was to point out,

The petty bourgeoisie has, in the long run, no autonomous class position of its own. This simply means that, in a capitalist social formation, there is only the bourgeois way and the proletarian way (the socialist way): there is no such thing as the 'third way', which various theories of the 'middle class' insist on. ... This means, among other things, that the petty bourgeoisie has nowhere ever been the politically dominant class. ... [T]he class positions taken by the petty bourgeoisie must necessarily be located in the balance of forces between the bourgeoisies and the working class and thus link up (by acting for or against) either with the class positions of the bourgeoisie or with those of the working class. ... [in the latter case] they do so even while they are still marked by petty bourgeois ideological features. (Poulantzas 1975, 297-8)

Below we see first how Marx criticised Proudhon for rejecting statism, in effect, any 'general organization of labour in society', because of a misunderstanding of the relationship between large scale capitalism and petty commodity production and go on to show that the new communists not only suffer from the same affliction but one made worse by their anti-communism. A critique of a number of new features of the new communists thinking and how it reflects their interests as a self-styled 'creative class' follows.

Divisions of Labour: Society and Factory

In their rejection of state and party, not only are the new communists simply preaching a new Third Way, even as they reject that of parliamentarist social democracy, they are, like Proudhon,

refusing what Marx calls below, ‘a general organization of labour in society’. Instead, they affirm their faith in the market organization of society, and the order of property, private property, it presupposes. Marx exposed the logic of this position as follows:

The same bourgeois consciousness which celebrates the division of labour in the workshop, the livelong annexation of the worker to a partial operation, and his complete subjection to capital, as an organization of labour that increases its productive power, denounces with equal vigour every conscious attempt to control and regulate the process of production socially, as an inroad upon such sacred things as the rights of property, freedom and the self-determining ‘genius’ of the individual capitalist. It is very characteristic that the enthusiastic apologists of the factory system have nothing more damning to urge against a general organization of labour in society than that it would turn the whole of society into a factory. (Marx 1867/1977, 477)

In effect not only does the petty bourgeoisie fear proletarianization precisely because it knows, as only practitioners can, what is involved in proletarian exploitation and oppression, but also because they can only think of socialism as the generalization of their current autonomy which rests on the radical heteronomy of others rather than as a socialised, collective, autonomy of all. Marx was to remark ironically in *Capital* how ‘[t]he sphere of circulation or commodity exchange ... is in fact the very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham’ (Marx 1867/1977, 280). This fictional idea formed the basis of the ‘socialism’ of petty bourgeois ‘socialists’ like Proudhon: ‘Proudhon creates his ideal of justice, of “*justice éternelle*”, from the juridical relations that correspond to the production of commodities: he thereby proves, to the consolation of all good petty bourgeois, that the production of commodities is a form as eternal as justice’ (Marx 1867/1977, 178n). Since such utopias rest on a narrowly one-sided view of capitalist society, ignoring the extraction of surplus labour in production, their proponents necessarily fail to appreciate how capitalism, and the wage labour which is its necessary foundation, alone generalises commodity production and the market, and does so necessarily at the expense of a ‘dialectical inversion’ of the laws of commodity production:

Only where wage-labour is its basis does commodity production impose itself upon society as a whole; but it is also true that only there does it unfold all its hidden potentialities. To say that the intervention of wage labour adulterates commodity production is to say that commodity production must not develop if it is to remain unadulterated. To the extent that commodity production, in accordance with its own immanent laws, undergoes a further development into capitalist production, the property laws of commodity production must undergo a dialectical inversion so that they become the laws of capitalist appropriation. (Marx 1867/1977, 733-4)

Engels in his introduction to German edition of *The Poverty of Philosophy* put his finger on the contradictory political kernel of Proudhonism – its desire to abolish large scale industry and the proletariat which are the conditions of existence of petty commodity production.

And the petty bourgeois especially, whose honest labour – even if it is only that of his workmen and apprentices – is daily more and more depreciated in value by the competition of large-scale production and machinery, this small-scale producer especially must long for a society in which the exchange of products according to their labour value is at last a complete and invariable truth. In other words, he must long for a society in which a single law of commodity production prevails exclusively and in full, but in

which the conditions are abolished in which it can prevail at all, viz., the other laws of commodity production and, later, of capitalist production. (Marx 1847, 12)

To this inability to understand that petty commodity production only exists on the basis of the generalization of commodity production which capitalism effects through large scale industry and wage labour, which formed the basis of Proudhon's anti-statism, the new communists add their own political baggage, a product of later history.

The Withering State of Proletarian Dictatorship

When Badiou alleges that Marx's account of the Paris Commune is ambiguous, marshals Engels' elaboration on it to testify further to this alleged ambiguity and rests his case against the statism of Actually Existing Communism in the east and 'capitalo-parliamentarism' in the West on Marx and Engels' writing on the Paris Commune, he pins on them a conception of the state they never had. This is the straightforward liberal and neoliberal conception of the state as the realm of coercion and the market as the realm of freedom. Not only does it overlook the mutual interdependence of the two in capitalist society but, much more seriously, allows the conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat to be opposed to that of the 'withering away of the state'. But in what Marx and Engels meant by the state, the former was the necessary instrument of the latter. For the state was not the administrative apparatus dreaded by liberals and neoliberals but an instrument of class domination. In this sense Marx and Engels' assessment of the Paris Commune as an exemplary dictatorship of the proletariat – 'do you want to know what the dictatorship of the proletariat looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the Dictatorship of the Proletariat' (Engels 1891) – was anything but ambiguous:

Its [the Paris Commune's] true secret was this. It was essentially a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour. (Marx 1871/1974, 212)

In *The Civil War in France*, Marx records first the full extent of the force and fraud the counter-revolution headed by Thiers had mustered against the popular cause. It was what gave the Commune that character Marx and Engels would later recognise as the dictatorship of the proletariat, the necessary instrument of the 'withering away' of the state as class domination and its replacement by freely associated producers which is communism. '*Armed Paris* was the only serious obstacle in the way of the counter-revolutionary conspiracy' (Marx 1871/174, 198). He then emphasised the scrupulously defensive character of the Commune's fight against counter-revolution. In a few compressed paragraphs he traced the transformation of the feudal absolutist state into an instrument of capitalist class domination (Marx 1871/1974, 206-8) before going on to describe the measures through which the Commune, during its all-too-short life, began converting it into an instrument of workers' power: 'the suppression of the standing army, and the substitution for it of the armed people'; the merging executive and legislative power; the enforcement of accountability on the police; public service at workmen's wages; education and science freed from state and Church influence and provided free; among others. Contrary to the fashionable portrayal of Marx as the *ur*-globalist through the repeated quotation of the same passages from *The Communist Manifesto* (for a fuller critique of this tendency see Desai forthcoming), Marx also saw the Commune as reorganising 'that unity of great nations which, if originally brought about by political force, has now become a powerful coefficient of social production' (Marx 1871/1974, 211) and doing so in a spirit of inter-nationalism.

Of course, ‘the old world writhed in convulsions of rage at the sight of the red flag, the symbol of the republic of labour, floating over the Hôtel de Ville’ (Marx 1871/1974, 214) and the Commune was brutally overpowered after a mere two months by the joint forces of Thiers and Bismarck,

And this unparalleled breach of the law of nations, even as understood by the old-world lawyers, instead of arousing the ‘civilized’ governments of Europe to declare the felonious Prussian government ... an outlaw amongst nations, only incites them to consider whether the few victims who escape the double cordon around Paris are not to be given up to the hangman at Versailles! (Marx 1871/1974, 231)

The Commune, the dictatorship of the proletariat was, Marx noted in the First Draft of the *Civil War in France*, ‘the reabsorption of state power by society’ (Marx 1871/1974, 250). It dispelled

the delusion as if administration and political governing were mysteries, transcendent functions only to be trusted to the hands of a trained caste – state parasites, richly paid sycophants and sinecurists, in the higher posts, absorbing the intelligence of the masses and turning them against themselves in the lower places of the hierarchy. (Marx 1871/1974, 251)

And the Commune embodied the consciousness that

the superseding of the economical conditions of the slavery of labour by the conditions of free and associated labour can only be the progressive work of time (that economical transformation), that they require not only a change of distribution, but a new organization of production, or rather the delivery (setting free) of the social forms of production in present organized labour (engendered by present industry), of the trammels of slavery, of their present class character *and their harmonious national and international coordination*. (Marx 1871/1974, 253). [Emphasis added]

It is such ‘general organization of labour in society’ Badiou and the new communists would reject. They are, of course, free to do so. What they are not free to do is assert that any ‘ambiguity’ in Marx’s or Engels’ accounts warrants it. Nor are they free to assert that Marx or Engels criticised any ‘statist incapacities’ of the Commune – certainly not in *The Civil War in France*, or its first draft, or yet Engels’ 1891 Introduction.

It was not out of any love for centralization or authority but because it was historically necessary in a society whose productive capacity had come to rest on large scale production that Marx and Engels so resolutely opposed anarchist tendencies and so scathingly criticised petty bourgeois fantasies about doing away with any overall coordination of the economy, fantasies that also rested, in effect, on accepting market coordination. But the reality that capitalism, necessarily large scale and based on wage labour alone generalised market relations and commodity production was bound to undermine the implementation of such fantasies. Engels’ remarks on the fate of the Proudhonists and the Blanquists in his 1891 Introduction highlight this contradiction. Proudhonists, despite their ‘positive hatred’ for association, found that ‘large scale industry had so much ceased to be an exceptional case that by far the most important decrees of the Commune instituted an organization of large scale industry and even of manufacture which was not based only on the association of workers in each factory, but also aimed at combining all these associations into one great union; in short an organization which, as Marx quite rightly says in *The Civil War*, must necessarily have led in the end to Communism, that is to say, the direct antithesis of the Proudhon doctrine’. For their part, the centralizing and conspiratorial Blanquists, a majority in the Commune, found themselves party to the fall of centralized and oppressive state

power (Engels 1891). One may note in concluding this part that while Žižek explicitly supports the importance of both party and state, in practice the unity of his three components of the working class appears to be the horizon of his conception of politics.

Everybody's Property versus Common Property

The new communists' incantation of Marx and Communism may signify a genuine desire to make their understanding of capitalism compatible with Marx's powerful critique, but in the case of all the main points on which they seek Marx's authority, they only end up proving that incantation never did require understanding. Take their conception of that centrepiece of their project, the commons. As a very early critique (Ciriacy-Wantrup and Bishop 1975) of the Garret Hardin's (1968) understanding of 'the commons', which appears to underlie the new communists' vision of communism, pointed out, the commons were never 'everybody's property'. Rather the commons were defined by complex institutional arrangements which provided rights to some sets of users and explicitly excluded others. This implies two things. First, the earth, culture and language or even our genetic inheritance are only open to corporate predation to the extent that they are *not protected* by regimes of property rights, or when the regimes which do protect them are too weak. Second, protecting them requires creating rules of access and use which have to be made and enforced by states. While under feudalism, with its dispersal of political power, such regimes were necessarily local, they are not under modern capitalist conditions and are unlikely to be at least in early socialist or communist ones. There is no alternative to state enforcement.

But there *is* a question of whose interests such arrangements and their enforcement will protect. Given Marx's complex chronicling of the use of political power to usurp common property and replace the rules governing them by private property (Marx 1867/1977, 873-941), and his account of the manner in which the Paris Commune sought to transform the state into an instrument of workers power, including extending collective ownership over the means of production discussed above, he would have understood this point which appears to have evaded our new communists entirely.

Indeed, contrary to Hardt, Marx never spoke of communism as the abolition of property *per se*, only of private property (Marx 1975, 348). When he quoted Marx saying that 'Private Property has made us so stupid that an object is only *ours* when we have it', Hardt did not tell us that Marx continued thus: 'when it exists for us as capital or when we directly possess, eat, drink, wear, inhabit it, etc., in short when we use it'. Marx was, therefore, criticising private property, and capitalist private property, not property as such. As he saw it, under communism capitalist private property would be replaced with forms of collective property appropriate to the structures of production, those inherited from capitalism and those created anew. The abolition of property as such which Hardt and Negri appear to desire, would only lead to the sort of free-for-all that Hardin, not to mention Hobbes, feared, a sort of state of nature in which the powerful would be able to appropriate at the expense of the weak. No amount of poetry about sensuous human appropriation of the world can hide the fact that the new communists of the commons not only misunderstand their central category – the commons – but also Marx's position on it, even as they seek to licence so much of their discourse through it. Marx was not 'searching' for any 'common' Hardt would recognise. Marx's understanding of property, evinced not least in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* to which Hardt refers, was too grounded, not to mention historically sophisticated, to make that mistake.

Vampire capitalism or zombie workers

Another critical and, *prima facie*, disingenuous, misunderstanding concerns the new communists' account of capitalism and the place of their own 'creative class' in it. Negri and Žižek attempt to found Carlo Vercellone's trendy account of 'cognitive capitalism' (see e.g. Vercellone 2008; for a critique see Camfield 2007) in Marx's own work. Correctly quoting Negri who was, in turn, quoting Marx from the *Grundrisse* on how the development of fixed capital expresses the extent to which 'social knowledge has become a direct force of production' (Marx 1973, 706), Žižek (2010, 222) goes on to claim, incorrectly, that

With the development of general social knowledge, the 'productive power of labour' is thus 'itself the greatest productive power. From the standpoint of the direct production process it can be regarded as the production of fixed capital. This fixed capital is man himself'.

Marx certainly speaks of social knowledge becoming a direct force of production in many places. However, the matter of the worker, intellectual or otherwise, becoming 'fixed capital' is another matter altogether. For those conversant with *Capital*, it is simply inconceivable that Marx could have said such a thing. He distinguished clearly between the worker as living labour in contrast to constant (fixed and circulating) capital as dead labour, between the worker who adds value and the capital which only transfers all or part of its value (depending on whether it is used up entirely or only partially in a given production process). A closer look at the passages in question, and at the *Grundrisse* where they occur, shows that Marx does not, in fact, give up on this distinction, the keystone of his theory of value. Martin Nicolaus points out in his foreword to the *Grundrisse* that in this work Marx's terminology, particularly relating to value, and money, 'is not quite untangled from and clear of the Ricardian lexicon'. This means that these questions are best studied from works Marx prepared for publication after the *Grundrisse*' (Nicolaus 1973, 16–17). But on the particular point at issue, Žižek and Negri's argument cannot even be given the benefit of any doubts this might create. The phrase 'this fixed capital being man himself' occurs in a critique of the bourgeois conception of economy or saving which Marx contrasts with 'real economy.' By that he means how economy or saving should be viewed, and would be, in a communist society: as the saving of labour time, the development of the human capacity to produce. Whereas in capitalist society such saving takes the form of the accumulation of fixed capital, in a socialist society it would take the form of the development of human capacities. He adds that in a communist society, the development of human capacities, this sort of 'saving,' would be also inseparable from the human capacity to consume, completely upending the everyday bourgeois conception of saving as abstinence from consumption (Marx 1973, 711–12). It is true that in this passage Marx moves between using categories that apply to capitalist society alone, which form the focus of his discussion in *Capital*, and those that emerge from the conception of 'production in general' which abstracts the common features of all social forms of production (Marx 1973, 85) and which occur in *Capital* only briefly, as for instance in the profound ruminations on labour and its history which serve to point up the specificity, not to mention absurdity and monstrosity, of capitalist conditions and categories (Marx 1867/1977, 283–92). But he sets out the distinction between these two sets of categories at the outset of the *Grundrisse*. While there are elements common to all forms of production, precisely those elements

. . . which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, so that in their unity – which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity, and of the object, nature – their essential difference is not forgotten. The whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing social relations lies in this forgetting. For example, no production is possible without an instrument of production, even if this instrument is only the hand. No production without stored-up, past labour, even if it is only the facility gathered together and concentrated in the hand of the savage by repeated practice. Capital is, among other things, also an instrument of production, also objectified, past labour. Therefore capital is a general, eternal relation of nature; that is if I leave out just the specific quality which alone makes ‘instrument of production’ and ‘stored-up labour’ into capital (Marx 1973, 85–6; emphasis added).

So not only are we clear that for Marx capital, fixed or otherwise, can occur only under capitalist conditions but also that it is precisely a characteristic of ‘modern economists’ and their apologia for capital that they confound the difference between stored-up past labour and capital. Žižek and Negri are welcome to agree with the modern economists, just not welcome to take Marx’s authority for doing so.

The weight of the distinction Marx makes repeatedly in *Capital* between the worker as living, value producing and value-transferring labour in contrast to constant (fixed and circulating) capital as dead labour simply crushes any attempt to argue that workers are, under any capitalist circumstances, ‘fixed capital’. Marx often and appropriately spoke of capital as a vampire, dead labour subsisting and growing by extracting the blood, the labour, of living workers, but the conversion of workers under capitalism into another category of the ‘undead’ deserves a place in the annals of solecism. The knowledge producer cannot be fixed capital for two further reasons. On the one hand knowledge production is unproductive labour. That is to say, that while it is very useful, and thus productive of piles of use values, it is unproductive of value or surplus value. And those knowledge workers who resent this insinuation, as it were, simply fail to understand, or do not know, that according to Marx the production of value is the basis only of the extraction of surplus value and that uniquely capitalist form of surplus labour, profit. By contrast, communism would be a system for the production of use values exclusively. If one understood this there would be no ground to disdain unproductive labour or resent being called an unproductive worker. Secondly, Žižek and Negri also appear to be victims of the neoclassical and, in Marx’s time, vulgar economic, illusion that capital is ‘productive’, an illusion that conveniently justifies profit which is, according to Marx, rooted in the extraction of surplus value, and therefore exploitation. Marx ridicules the ‘vulgar economists’ who speak of the ‘productivity of capital’ (e.g. Marx 1867/1977, 426). Thus, while Žižek and Negri see intellectual workers as fixed capital, Marx would never make such a conflation. Therefore, whatever the merit of the following claim, that ‘since capital organizes its exploitation by appearing as “fixed capital” against living labour, the moment the key component of fixed capital is “man himself”, its “general social knowledge”, the very social foundation of capitalist exploitation is undermined, and the role of capital becomes purely parasitic’ (Žižek 2010, 222), it has no foundation in Marx.

The Value of Knowledge and the Knowledge of Value

Indeed, it is only their general ignorance of Marx's critique of political economy, not to mention its hopeless conflation with the categories of bourgeois political economy which permits the new communists to announce the demise of some such as 'profit' and the emergence of other such as 'profit-as-becoming-rent'. Not only do the new communists rely on questionable ideas about the emergence of some sort of knowledge/information/cognitive capitalism (Huws 1999), nothing could be farther from the truth than that 'cognitive capitalism', 'information society' and 'knowledge economy' and their attendant production processes are qualitatively different from the commodity production analysed by Marx. As Marx pointed out, all labour processes involve knowledge (Marx 1867/1977, 284) and in this the so-called information commodities are no different except in degree. All such knowledge is social and is embodied in the collective worker and this, while making the working class as a whole more productive, in part by embodying more knowledge in some parts of it than others, by no means turns it, or any part of it, into fixed capital. Knowledge does not create value. Though it may generate ever greater heaps of use values and make labour more productive, it is not itself an intermediate good. The value of any intermediate good is only transferred to the product in being destroyed in the intermediate form and knowledge which is embodied in the collective worker is never destroyed but can be used repeatedly and for many different purposes. Nor does knowledge have value – though it may have incomparable use value, it does not have value because it is the product of a long human history and not of capitalist production: as Marx said, things are useful in many ways and 'The discovery of these ways and hence of the manifold uses of things is the work of history' (Marx 1867/977, 126). Just as, for Marx, nature has use value but no value, so 'Science, generally speaking, costs the capitalist nothing, a fact that by no means prevents him from exploiting it' (Marx 1867/1977, 508n).

Even today, the further development of knowledge takes place within systems – whether public schools or universities, not to mention extra-institutional locations – which produce only use values. As Fred Block (2008) has recently recorded, this is especially true of the avowedly free market US in the past several decades where the attempt to create property rights over certain elements of knowledge has rested, nevertheless, on a 'hidden developmental state'. Thus, there has been no '*privatization of the general intellect itself*' (Žižek 2010, 224) and when Žižek claims that Marx overlooked it he is engaging in a double effrontery: falsely attributing the idea of the worker turned into fixed capital to Marx and then accusing him of not anticipating the alleged 'privatization of the general intellect'.

Rent Versus Profit?

To speak of profit being replaced by rent is simply absurd. As Marx and the classical political economy of his time clearly saw, rent is, like interest, an unearned *deduction* from profit and can never exist independently of, let alone replace, the latter in a commodity producing society. The idea could only have occurred to those unfamiliar with Marx's economic analysis: his labour theory of value which clearly states that the value of things is determined by the socially necessary labour embodied in it; his clear recognition that while things which do not have value can still have a price, payment of which represents deductions from wages and profits; his analysis of productive and unproductive labour; and his analysis of the distribution of profit to

the owners of land and money capital. The general unfamiliarity with these ideas is licensed by Marxist economists long inured to adapting Marx's critique of political economy to neoclassical or marginalist economics even though it differed on the central idea of value, rejecting classical political economy's conception of objective value in favor of a subjective idea of value, based on utility and individual preferences (Clarke, 1991; Desai 2010). This 'Marxism without Marx', as Freeman (2010) calls it, habituates our new communists to think in neoclassical or vulgar economic terms such as factor endowments and incomes in which 'land' and 'capital', not to mention 'knowledge', are regarded as productive of value.

As for the idea that the principal source of surplus in contemporary society is not profit extracted from workers but rent from the privatization of the 'general intellect' of the 'creative class', one can only admire the size of the creative class's collective ego which assumes that the only 'value' these commodities embody is that of 'millions of intellectual workers' who are 'no longer separated from the objective conditions of their labour since they own their own computers' (Žižek 2010, 225). Quite apart from there being a big question whether the 'general intellect' has been privatized at all (Archibugi and Filipetti 2010), there is the small matter of the surplus value, and consequently profit, extracted from labour of those who produce the material objects which the products of 'cognitive capitalism' still are, not to mention those on which the 'creative class' must still subsist.

The Democracy of Profit and the Authoritarianism of Rent?

Žižek's associated argument that the turn towards authoritarianism is rooted in this transition from profit to rent is independently problematic. The idea that 'till now, capitalism seemed inextricably linked with democracy' betrays such a profoundly a-historical and unmarxist understanding as to take one's breath away. Capitalism's relationship to liberal democracy was always profoundly conflicted. While the past thirty years of neoliberalism – with its rising inequality, attacks on unions, denaturing of democracy by money and the media and even the very idea of democracy – may have made this relationship even more antagonistic, it was hardly idyllic before that. That liberal democracy accompanied capitalism should surely be considered a tautology: it was hardly going to accompany feudalism. But it took generations of workers', women's, minorities and colonial peoples' struggles to realise universal suffrage and democratise the liberal order of capitalist private property in country after country (a very partial and subjective list of key works on these themes: Therborn 1977; Cammack 1997; Eley 2002; MacPherson 1979; Leys 1999; Mair 2006). This should be familiar to any leftist. Sadly, it is not.

The New Communists and Marxism without Marx

Perry Anderson remarked long ago that Western Marxism, a product of defeat, 'inverted the trajectory of Marx's own development....Where the founder of historical materialism moved progressively from philosophy to politics and then economics, as the central terrain of this thought, the successors of the tradition that emerged after 1920 increasingly turned back from economics and politics to philosophy', that they 'concentrate[d] overwhelmingly on the study of superstructures' and left 'the central economic and political realities that have dominated world history' out of account (Anderson 1976, 52, 75, 103). However, even this judgement seems on reflection too lenient. For Marx's philosophy could hardly be separated from his economic and political analyses and not surprisingly the chief deficiencies of today's new communist

philosophers lie precisely in their economic and political analyses and their misapprehensions of the very Marxist ideas they wish to rely on. One may also note the historical incongruity of a conference of avowedly left intellectuals in the midst of the greatest economic crisis of capitalism for 70 years not only devoid of economic analysis but seeking to revive communism as an ‘Idea’, rather than attempting, through economic and political analyses, to discern ‘the elements of the new society with which the old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant’ indeed, worse, of discerning only themselves – the ‘creative class’ as fixed capital (!).

It is this class which now becomes so central to capital that its income now is no longer profit from the extraction of surplus labour but rent from the ‘privatization of the general intellect’, namely themselves. Even after making their own labour the fount of all value in contemporary society, their emancipatory vision can aspire to no more than the freedom of this class to acquire those ‘human faculties, competences, knowledges, and affects – those acquired on the job but more importantly those accumulated outside work’ which ‘are directly productive of value’ (Hardt 2010, 141) through a liberation of the conditions of their social reproduction from neoliberal privatization. This is the stunted utopia of the class that stands to ‘lose everything’. As for those who do indeed have nothing to lose, corralled into the categories of ‘new proletarians’ and the ‘Excluded’, they turn out to be little more than a phantom class, a product of a radicalization of the concept of the proletariat ‘to an existential level well beyond Marx’s imagination’.

Indeed, for all its confusions, 19th century Proudhonism cuts a rather more radical figure than its 21st century epigones. Whereas Proudhonism represented the independent commodity production, the new communists represent a ‘creative class’ whose leading edge are employees of big capital. Whereas Proudhonism proclaimed the abolition of capital, albeit equating it with big capital and the evil of wage labour, as their goal, the new communists appear at best confused and at worst disingenuous when they take the name of a movement which aimed at the revolutionary transformation of capitalism but aimed explicitly at its preservation. At best the new communists seek to prevent the abolition of their own conditions of labour through neoliberal privatization, though here too they are inconsistent, saying on the one hand that ‘any attempt to privatize [intellect] becomes problematic’ thanks to its social character and, on the other, launching their philippics against the possibility. In fact, they need not have bothered. In reality the intellectual property rights regime which the West and particularly the United States have attempted to impose on the world ‘has not and could not change the nature of knowledge and the ways in which this can be transferred [or not] among economic agents’ (Archibugi and Filipetti 2010, 146).

The new communism of the commons is, moreover, unlikely to have emancipatory consequences for the vast masses whose name they conveniently invoke. Their account of ‘cognitive capitalism’ not only does not criticise but in fact rests on the division of intellectual and manual labour whose consequences not only Marx but also Smith criticised so powerfully. Indeed, so far it is also unclear how the interests of the poor might be affected if this relatively privileged class seeks, NIMBY-style, to protect nature, which it considers ‘the inheritance of humanity as a whole’, conveniently ignoring not only the division of humanity into nations but its division into rich and poor nations and their own location in the former, from ‘corporate control’, while explicitly rejecting any state role in doing so. Such anti-statism forgets the reality of powerful state protections in the first world and would leave third world populations defenceless against the predations of foreign and domestic capital (for another critique of this

tendency see Desai 2009). Truly the new communists treat Marxist and communist ideas as a grab-bag of accessories with which to trick out their absurd imaginings as communism.

Use Values, the State and Revolution

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on three themes: Why produce value? What's exactly wrong with 'statism'? What might revolution look like?

The first point is easily dealt with: the flawed idea that the labour of the creative class has become 'value' rests on an all-too-common illusion that the production of value in capitalism was, according to Marx, a good thing. While he necessarily focused on it in his critique of the logic of capital, the reality is that communism would, in Marxist terms, require the cessation of the production of value and a vast expansion of the production of use-values and the welfare state, the great gain of the western working class and nothing if not the result of parliamentary and state-focused politics, and the mitigation of oppression it represents is, precisely, an expansion of the production of use values. That our new communists do not understand this is the result of a problem they share with the Proudhonism of the 19th century: an inability to distinguish between value and use value. The expansion of all means of producing use values – whether home/autonomous production or through common/state production would, in any transition from capitalism, be part of a broader strategy of reducing the production of value and increasing the production of use-values.

This brings us to our second point: just as the new communists conflate use values and exchange values, so they conflate regulation and the state. As I have already pointed out, deluded individualism of the new petty bourgeois concept of itself as a creative class leads them to defer and deny any possibility of 'a general organization of labour in society' and in this it is of little consequence that emancipation for most will involve precisely such a general organization of labour in society. For Marx and Engels, as we saw above, the state was above all an instrument of class domination. It is this stateness of the state that would wither away as soon as there was no need for class domination. By the same token, the need to administer the complex division of labour – in factories and in society – would remain at least in the transition period and, though later democratic decisions in favour of decentralization may diminish central authority, it is unlikely to be entirely eliminated.

While as one side of the division between mental and manual labour the conditions of work of the 'creative class' who the new communists seem primarily to represent might resemble small scale workplaces, their very output enables ever more large scale and complex forms of divisions of labour within and between firms. And this is where most people work, or hope to work, and this productive apparatus would still have to be administered, and transformed. But the organization – the self-organization of producers – would no longer be a *state* in so far as there was no class (or gender or other, Marx and Engels would hardly have disagreed) domination and any revolution would have to be immediately consolidated by a dictatorship of the proletariat in so far as there was counter-revolutionary activity.

Finally, we come to revolution. Revolutionary politics is widely and rightly contrasted with reformism, the belief that capitalism's problems are limited and can be resolved without questioning its fundamental basis in private property in the means of production, is not the same as reforms. The latter may or may not be part of fundamental critiques of capitalism (or patriarchy, racism or imperialism) but that would not, and historically has not, prevented a wide range of political perspectives and forces from cooperating in them. Moreover, what makes a

demand a reform or revolutionary depends on the historical conjuncture. A modest demand for, say, cheap bread, might turn out to be revolutionary if the ruling order was unable or unwilling to fulfill it and the political energy and organization existed behind it to inspire people to believe that if it is not going to be fulfilled it was time for people to remove the ruling order and fulfill it for themselves, and enable them to do so. Nor is the achievement of reforms in itself to be disdained. The capitalist class opposes reforms for good reason: they strengthen the capacity and will of working classes to pursue more ambitious goals. Kalecki (1943) had identified much the same logic in his analysis of the political implication of full employment – it was because full employment as a reform would have this effect that he recognized that it would be politically difficult for the bourgeoisie to accept. How reforms and revolution can be linked dialectically (Patnaik 2009b) was illustrated in the case of Sweden where a long history of working class gains led, at its culmination, in ‘reforms’ which entailed the gradual transfer of the ownership of the means of production to workers (Korpi, 1983), though it failed thanks to a capitalist counter-offensive.

This complex relationship between reform and revolution is especially important to understand because no one, not even the citizens of the most advanced capitalist country, lives in a ‘pure’ capitalism. Actually existing capitalism everywhere necessarily (and not least because they are not abstract, universal capitalisms, no matter how universalizing the operation of the law of value, but national ones) rely on a number of political, social, and cultural structures and practices – both traditional and modern. While some of these serve to intensify oppression and exploitation, and reforms would ease but not eliminate them, others are precisely the result of reforms. They furnish the second aspect of Karl Polanyi’s (1944/1985) ‘double movement’ – the movement of social protection against the incursion of capitalism or what he called ‘market society’. These measures constitute, especially in the advanced capitalist world, a dense network of structures and practices – from city zoning restrictions to national regulatory and welfare structures – that modify the dynamics of capitalism quite substantially (Elson, 1988, 2000). Indeed, as critical legal scholars are reminding us, even in the most highly developed capitalist states, and even after three decades of neoliberalism, ‘the public-private, state-market dichotomies and the notions of “natural”, market-based laws of distribution which underlie much contemporary social, economic and legal analyses’ remain highly questionable. The ‘[d]istribution of the social product’ is ‘a phenomenon shaped by law’ and that ‘choice of law and policy remains pervasive’ (Ireland 2003). Making these legal and policy choices, rather than assuming they do not exist as the ‘myth of deregulation’ encourages us to do as much as the new communist mantra of a politics distanced from states and even democracies, is seamless with what Elson calls ‘socializing the market’, in effect expanding non-capitalist production of use values in ways that favor working people and strengthen their organizations while limiting the prerogatives of capital and private property. All these are reforms worthy of achievement in their own right.

Their pursuit would be a more concrete form of revolutionary politics than the, in effect, magical conception of the new communists who cannot tell us how exactly the ‘instauration of the citizen’s income’ is to be achieved through a mere unity of the working classes, and apart from a politics focused on the state. If undertaken with sufficient organization, seriousness of purpose and political will to take on the inevitable opposition to them, there is no telling at what point determined struggles to extend the sphere of common services, use value production and reform in favour of working people will involve the replacement of the capitalist ruling classes and their order. The problem will certainly not be the reforms themselves, nor will it be engagement with parliamentary politics. It need not be, and is not, all ‘capitalo-parliamentarism’,

depressing though recent decades have been on this front. The ‘parliamentary destiny’ of the left is not only to be lamented. The decisive factor will be how ambitious we are in conceiving the reforms, how active we are in organizing for them, how capable we are of achieving them and how seriously we mean to achieve them. As a new cycle of protest begins around the world – from Cairo to Madison, clearly showing that the citizens of the former are as little subject to ‘populist fundamentalism’ as those of the latter are to ‘enlightened hedonism or liberal multiculturalism’ – it is perhaps time to treat the ‘legacy of May ’68’ less reverentially and reach further back to the real legacy of the Spring of 1871: the first embodiment of popular power.

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