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COMMUNISM – IDEA VS. ‘REAL MOVEMENT’?

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‘It’s quite straightforward, you’ll understand it. It’s not hard.’ The enthusiasm with which part of the intellectual left greeted the rehabilitation of the ‘idea of communism’ by philosophers such as Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek (especially Badiou, Douzinas, and Žižek 2010) may remind one of this first line of Brecht’s ‘In Praise of Communism’. It should, however, also make one wonder whether the straightforward and easy-to-understand character of this project does not come at a certain price. The price seems to be an almost complete disconnection of ‘the idea of communism’, or of the ‘communist hypothesis’, from a social-theoretical analysis of the present – and thus from Marxism as a theoretical project.

This rejection of social theory (not to speak of empirical social research) corresponds to the voluntarism and purism inherent in a position that sees the ‘fidelity’ of a subject to a singular event as the mark of political radicalism. The radical break with the status quo is uncoupled from its social conditions of possibility and seems to become a matter of decision. Accordingly, the question ‘why communism?’, or ‘why be a communist?’, tends to become a question of faith. Both politics and the philosophical attempts to grasp its logic are purified from all traces of the social.

From a Marxist perspective that is committed to the unity of analysis and critique, on the level of theory, and of political and social struggles, on the level of practice, this must seem deeply problematic. Communism, if it still means anything, has to be more than an idea or a hypothesis – in the words of *The German Ideology*, it has to be understood as ‘a real move-

ment’ (Marx and Engels 1969 (3): 35; Tucker 1978: 162), i.e. a movement both in the historical and the political sense, immanent to the actual social and historical situation, and at the same time a radical negation of the existing social order. But can we still speak of communism in these terms?

The two authors we present in this issue – Étienne Balibar and Franck Fischbach – make a significant contribution to this debate about communism, and they do so from a decidedly political, non-orthodox Marxist standpoint that systematically relates theory, political practice and social experience in a way that does not succumb to economic reductionism, historical determinism or the messianic elevation of the proletariat.

Balibar and Fischbach might be seen as representative of two highly original and continually intersecting strands in recent French philosophy, one pertaining more to political philosophy, the other more to social philosophy. In the first perspective, authors such as Miguel Abensour and Balibar aim at resurrecting the radical and revolutionary potential of the idea and practice of democracy (Abensour 2009 and 2010; Balibar 2010a and 2010b). Their starting point is a critique of the common identification of democracy with the institutions of the state. In contrast, they insist on the subversive potential of what Marx in 1843 has called ‘true democracy’ – democracy being the only political regime that explicitly acknowledges that ‘it is not the constitution which creates the people but the people which creates the constitution’, thereby continually working against the state as a power that is separate from society and which claims to transcend its contradictions (Marx and Engels 1969 (1): 231; Tucker 1978: 20). Contrary to what Marx’s critics often assume, the aim is not to emancipate people from politics, but to enable them to engage in politics as collective self-determination. As Balibar has rightly pointed out over and over again, such a radical and emancipatory understanding of the practice of democracy is torn between a politics of revolution and insurrection and a politics of institutionalization, thus facing aporias and internal contradictions that subject it to the imperative of constant self-reflection and self-critique.

The second perspective seeks to rehabilitate the project of social philosophy (as an alternative both to speculative philosophy and empiricist sociology), so central to the tradition of critical theory. In order to properly

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situate it, we have to remember that the restoration of (liberal) political philosophy in France in the 1980s was a project directly aimed against the influence of the social sciences – and also of Marxism. This project has also been eloquently opposed by Badiou and Rancière, but in contrast to them it is a younger generation of scholars – among them Fischbach and Emmanuel Renault (the editor of the important journal *Actuel Marx*, in which the following two articles have originally appeared) (Fischbach 2009a and 2009b; Renault 2004 and 2008) – who insist that political questions cannot be addressed outside of a social-theoretical perspective. Political struggles and their agents are always socially situated, and although political practice is certainly not determined by its social context, it cannot be understood apart from it. In the tradition of critical theory, therefore, philosophical reflection and the empirical analysis of society have to be combined, and this analysis has to be related to the experiences of agents and the social struggles they engage in (Fischbach 2010).

How is all of this related to communism? In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels characterize communism (which now seems another word for ‘true democracy’) as a movement that ‘strips [social relations] of their natural character and subjugates them to the power of the united individuals’ (1969 (3): 70; Tucker 1978: 193). We might see manifestations of this movement wherever people struggle for freedom and equality for all. The link between these struggles, communism, and the perspective of social and political philosophy, however, is as ambivalent as it seems uncertain. But then we should not forget how Brecht ends his ‘In Praise of Communism’: ‘It’s just the simple thing/That’s hard, so hard to do.’

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