

Movements or Events?

Antonio Negri versus Alain Badiou on Politics

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Do not say that social movement excludes political movement. There is never a political movement which is not at the same time social.

—Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*

Constituent power constitutes society and identifies the social and the political in an ontological nexus.

—Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*

Introduction

This essay was written while, in Hamburg, Germany, the leading politicians of the Group of 20 (G20) nations were meeting for an international summit in order to discuss political and economic policies for the future (with no effective results, with the exception of policies related to the “war on terror”).

Whereas the leaders were meeting in the city of Hamburg in the name of democracy, public discussion, and global justice, the event was one of the most secured political meetings ever. More than 20,000 police officers were charged with controlling and securing two minor areas of the city. They were controlling antiglobalization and anticapitalist protestors who turned Hamburg into a place where the political conflict lines of today’s world emerged most visibly. Outdoor camps for sleep and food, that is, for

basic necessities for the reproduction of life, based on human rights, were at first forbidden by the German police, whose decision not to allow protestors to stay outside and overnight had to be challenged in the German constitutional courts. Protest marches, one with more than 70,000 people, were fenced in and surrounded by the means of violence that are available to the police today. Helicopters controlled the scene from the air. Politicians warned of the “violent potential” of a few hundred “radical” protestors,” and this turned into a general antileft outcry after the event was over.

Despite the pervasive range, the police and party officials rarely mentioned the visible violence originating in the state in the form of a police force that, from day one, followed an *escalation* and confrontational strategy toward the protestors. Quasi-feudal politicians such as Putin, Trump, and Erdogan, who were residing in the most luxurious places and are the representatives and deciders of today’s most devastating global economic and ecological policies, stand for a global wealth class which, when viewed from the perspective of the protesting activists, is the enemy of a just and free global order. Indeed, the deep divisions between the state, the activists, and the spectators in front of their television sets could not be more visible than during this “event” in Hamburg.

Democracy, as it exists today in most countries that the G20 leaders represent, is characterized by a deep gulf about which Marx had already worried more than 150 years ago, namely, the gulf between the political system and a civil society separated from it and structured by capital. This gulf depoliticizes civil society because it tends to establish a total barrier between the political system and its constituting power, that is, the people. As a consequence, democratic participants are turned into spectators. The protest marches and the public resistance are the consequence of this dividing line of our societies. Ironically, those who claim to stand for democracy must be protected against democracy.

In the meantime, the German national press, including *Der Spiegel* and *Die Zeit*, bemoaned that these protests were not a sign of a “democratic culture.” Even if the abstract argument that the destructive negativity brought about by the “Black Bloc(k)” (which turned Hamburg’s *Schanzenviertel* into a war-like zone) does not lead anywhere is correct, the targets of the outrage of the most radical protestors such as private property, the hypocritical attitude of most citizens, global wealth divisions, and the militarized state are rarely really analyzed and named. Instead, the protests are dismissed as “violent” without a clear understanding that the G20 leaders stand for a global military imperialism, a security and control system, as well as a global dynamics of wealth accumulation involving by far some of the most violent arrangements that ever existed; this is the case even

though this is not always visible on our media screens. Instead, the centrist media, think tanks, and public relations spokespersons tend to depict the protestors' violence as the main problem, even when many first-person accounts pointed out that it was the police that provoked the violence by overextending the already massive security measures and limitations of constitutional rights of German and non-German citizens alike.

As a consequence, a member of the right-wing party *AfD* (Alternative for Germany), herself a representative of a state parliament, called for shooting radical left activists and the police union organization announced via Twitter that limiting constitutional rights is constitutive of democracy. In addition, the police compiled a secret blacklist of journalists and more than thirty lost their accreditation: a practice that we have seen in states such as Russia and Turkey. Given this "hatred of democracy" (Rancière) and these authoritarian reactions, signs of discontent could be detected in the German media, but overall, the attention had shifted away from the connection between capital, power, and police violence to focus instead on those few who were attacking the connection with pavement bricks.¹

Given this overall situation, should we read these events as a sign of hope in times at which the "post-Marxist" intellectual left is still struggling to redefine itself in the face of its twentieth-century defeats, or should we read them as a sign of further failure and defeat?

Contemporary post-Marxist ideas ranging from Foucault and Laclau/Mouffe to Butler and Žižek are rooted, to a large extent, in political and social experiences after 1945 and 1968 in Europe, such as the failure of the French and Italian Communist parties, the exhaustion of the East European socialist project, the downfall of the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic, the development of welfare states, the stabilization of representative democracies in Europe, the development of the European Union as well as the events in Hungary, Prague, and May 1968 in Paris. Moreover, contemporary left thought is also rooted in the development of the neoliberal era, which began with the Thatcher and Reagan administrations in Great Britain and the United States and was extended then by social-democratic governments under Tony Blair, Gerhard Schröder, and Bill Clinton. These in turn led to a destruction of traditional labor organizations and, through the embracement of global capital, to the hastened arrival of postindustrial social structures in Europe and the United States. Faced with these defeats and in accord with the overall liberal-democratic and centrist turn in most Western countries, most post-Marxists, such as Axel Honneth and Chantal Mouffe, gave up the idea that a fully liberated society could ever exist. As a consequence, thinking about political movements in a pluralistic and "antagonistic"

context is, for most post-Marxists, more central than thinking about the possibility of a different world.

There are two exceptions to this generalized conceptual situation, namely, Antonio Negri and Alain Badiou: neither has given up on the idea of communism and on strong visions of a postcapitalist society even though their thinking represents two contrasting positions on the left political spectrum. On the one hand, we have Badiou's contemporary Maoist thinking, and on the other, Negri and Hardt's "postmodern" version of linking together topics concerning cognitive capitalism, biopolitics, and empire.

Although Negri and Hardt are usually described as offering a "non-dogmatic" version of post-Marxism, their position can be identified with the attempt to deliver a *contemporary* vision of Marxist thought that, at least to some extent, remains true to its core, namely, the connection between Marxist social theory and political philosophy. Accordingly, for them political thought can only be defined in connection with a theory of subjectivity and labor defined by recent developments in global capitalism.

In contradistinction to this and in relation to the question of how to combine social theory, political economy, and political thought, Badiou is furthest away from a Marxian base (broadly defined), insofar as one of his central claims is that politics needs to be rethought as "true" politics, which he conceives of as being independent from questions of social form and social-economic structure. Seen in this light, Badiou represents a political thinking that positions itself against Marx since it rejects any dialectical relation between the social-economic and the political.

Dissimilarly, Negri's thinking is, on a close reading, one of the few exceptions in contemporary post-Marxist thought, insofar as it remains, perhaps surprisingly for some readers, *closest* to the attempt to read the social and the political as *coconstitutive* of subjects. Consequently, the premise of this essay is different from the position of some commentators who, in a recent critique of Negri and Hardt, write that Negri and Hardt succumb "to the relativistic left-liberal point that truth has a diversity of different meanings and interpretations. For us, Hardt and Negri are indeed representatives of those left-liberal thinkers who we believe disavow the Real of capitalism."² It may be true that Negri and Hardt fail properly to understand contemporary capitalism; nevertheless, their thinking of politics cannot be disconnected from their thinking about contemporary forms of labor and productivity. As such, I argue, they have a far superior position in comparison to Badiou's outdated Maoist thinking in the form of an "*all or nothing*," which falls back, especially once one understands the concrete aspects of his ideas, not only on idealism but also on what Adorno once called "regressive romanticism."

The differences between Negri and Badiou can be schematically presented in the following way:

	<i>Negri</i>	<i>Badiou</i>
<i>The political agent</i>	creative laborer/multitude	militant soldier/masses
<i>Relation between the social-economic and the political</i>	dialectical relation	primacy of politics
<i>Marxism</i>	theory and praxis	praxis
<i>Form of the revolution</i>	movements and transitions	events and ruptures
<i>Communism</i>	reappropriation of the common	absolute egalitarianism
<i>Ethos</i>	Joy	discipline

In what follows, I will side with Negri and suggest that, due to its abstractions, Badiou's political thinking should be rejected and, instead, Negri's model of thinking about the political in connection with the social should be favored. Badiou's thinking is still oriented along old Maoist (and Sartrean)³ claims that the political can be conceived of as external to the social structure and the social form. As Balibar puts it, "the central materialist category for Badiou is not that of *social relations*, and even less that of *production*, but in the Maoist tradition, that of the *masses*."⁴ Knowledge, technology, education, transportation and communication, military and police, geographical condition, ecological conditions, gender and race relations are all secondary for Badiou. Even if one might disagree with their analysis of contemporary forms of labor and subjectivity,⁵ Negri's (and Hardt's) concept of the political in connection with the social is far superior to Badiou's notion, insofar as it takes the social into account as constitutive of the political and it does not lead to the consequence that we need to wait for some truth-event that can only be defined retroactively. As Negri pointed out, waiting for the revolutionary moment in Badiou's sense seems to be an extension of Heidegger's rather apolitical concept of *Gelassenheit*.⁶

Negri: Society Exists

Negri's basic position regarding the problem of how to think about left politics, revolution, and social struggles is not very difficult to understand.

Though he no longer puts it in words that stem directly from Marx, Negri does still argue that a proper analysis of the political openings and political resistance to the given system must be based on a thorough examination of where we currently are in general social and economic terms. Accordingly, we are asked to analyze the “changes taking place in the ontology of the present.”⁷ By “the ontology of the present,” Negri has primarily four aspects in mind: (1) the changes in terms of labor productivity under the conditions of what others have called “cognitive capitalism”; (2) the emerging new “subjectivities” that are connected to new forms of labor and productivity; (3) the specific contemporary domination and control that capital forces upon us; and (4) the global structures related to the state and its system of material apparatuses. As Negri puts it, “materialism today means the biopolitical context.”⁸ He writes that one goal of his philosophizing is

to understand how a new materialist analysis, applied politically in a class sense, could create a proposition for social struggles against capitalist command—and for how critique should work; not by seeking to impose (sometimes heroically; too often in vain) a past onto a present that had by now been thoroughly reshaped by the reforms and transformations taking place in command and in capitalist exploitation, but by shaking up this present, breaking it from the inside, and making possible the expression, in a rough and constituent manner, of the subjectivities that had been produced in it and were enclosed in it.⁹

The base theorem regarding the relation between the social-economic and the political is clearly formulated in the quote above insofar as Negri points out that the possibility of struggles *against* capital can only be defined, and are structured by, the *specific* form that the capital-labor relation has taken on in our times. To repeat the point: Even if one does not agree with all aspects of Negri’s and Hardt’s “ontology of the present,” the fundamental claim about the substantial intertwining of the social and the political remains intact and, in this regard, Negri differs from most other “post-Marxist” philosophers who prioritize the political over the social and end up with totally different ontologies (such as Badiou’s).

It is clear, then, that for Negri, any political struggle can only be defined in terms of how such struggles relate to capital, whereas Badiou’s position disconnects the political from capital. Negri writes: “If this is the situation, it becomes logical and essential that the rupture—every rupture—should take place within this framework.”¹⁰ Put differently, the possibility of rupture and the *form* that it can take depend upon the contemporary social-economic

situation, which, according to Negri, has significantly changed during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Badiou claims exactly the opposite, namely: the situation of capitalism has not changed a bit. Consequently, for Negri, the struggle to overcome a society determined by capital can only come from *within* a society organized by capital and must be built upon the openings provided by the dialectics of labor power and exploitation. In contrast, Badiou argues that *any* attempt to think about the political from within the system is helpless and meaningless insofar as it simply reproduces the dynamics of capital itself. Consequently, he also does not seem to take seriously Marx's own position that is of importance for Negri; namely, the idea that capital has the tendency to "socialize" itself.

As Marx already understands in volume 3 of *Capital*, with the growing public nature of capital (through public investments, stock markets, public stakeholders, and so on) capital opens up the possibility of what Marx calls, in a letter to Engels, the "communism of capital," the idea of which is decisive for Negri.¹¹ Stated in Negri's own words, "Under these conditions, subjected to this dynamic, capital strips itself of any 'individuality'; it becomes *social capital*. But even more important is the fact that the 'productive forces' immediately become 'social.'"¹²

Given these specific social forms of capital and labor, the political struggle cannot be understood, for Negri, without a precise comprehension of the political subjects (multitude) and the productive capacities (cognitive and affective labor) by which these subjects are determined. Put differently, according to Negri, political struggle has a social *form* whereas for Badiou political struggle is socially formless. Instead, as Badiou argues, the political subject is constituted by an "idea" (I will return to this in the next section). As a consequence, all social-economic mediators, such as labor, communication, transport, exchange, technologies, and so on, have no importance for Badiou.¹³

We can already see at this point how abstract Badiou's position remains in the end, insofar as he does not take seriously Marx's advice, in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*, that one cannot rob a "stockjobbing nation" in the same way as one would rob a society that is determined by "cow shepherds," given that the plane of the relations of production and distribution is decisive. Put in contemporary terms, one cannot beat a highly militarized state that is based on the development of digital technologies and highly educated laborers with pavement bricks and beer bottles. Accordingly, the *entire* trust of Badiou's vision is based on the massification of populations and the "people's war."

In contrast, Negri remains in close proximity to the notion of social experiment; his philosophy is more playful, open, positive, hopeful, and is

also in solidarity with the oppressed. Trust in life and joy of life “in the sense of the increasing power of an expansive social subject” are central:¹⁴ “No, the human being is not one dimensional, and the concepts about which we have spoken up to now, which the left, moralizing and pessimistic, claims as its own—these concepts must be categorically rejected. In the first place, because they are not true; in the second place, because they produce ethical impotence and political defeatism.”¹⁵ Where Badiou remains in safe philosophical distance and sees only limitations, Negri sees possibilities and potentialities. Constituent power “always refers to the future.”¹⁶

The concepts of movement politics and reform are far more important for Negri than they are for Badiou. As Negri jokingly puts this, “ensuring the recognition of these common rights is the only right way out of the crisis. One last joke on this subject: there will be some (Rancière, Žižek, and Badiou have already said as much) who see these ‘reforms’ as completely useless, indeed as damaging for workers—well, why not try them? Why don’t we suggest them to Wall Street?”¹⁷ What Negri calls “dispositifs of *exodus*”¹⁸ refers to revolutionary openings *because* the contemporary developments of cognitive labor has led to a situation in which labor is totally subsumed under capital. Therefore, at least if we accept Negri’s premises about the nature of the contemporary productive subject, the subject remains outside of capital accumulation since cognitive and affective labor, in the form of what Marx called “the general intellect,” create forms of expression that are difficult for capital to dominate and subject to its power: “When labor is recognized as immaterial, highly scientific, affective, and cooperative (when, in other words, its relationship to existence and to forms of life is revealed and when it is defined as a social function of the community), we can see that from the laboring processes (follow the elaboration of networks of social valorization) and the production of alternative subjectivities.”¹⁹

The intellectualization of the labor process leads to a different form of the class struggle as a “political recomposition of antagonism”; in addition, the old Marxist distinction between intellectual and manual labor no longer holds, for Negri, insofar as nowadays, in cognitive capitalism, almost all labor is intellectual.²⁰ “Today the intellectual can speak as a common individual.”²¹ The contemporary conflict lines that surround biopiracy, patent rights, and intellectual property are probably a good example for what Negri has in mind: capital is unable to discipline and command intellectual and creative laborers insofar as the “networks of cooperation”²² and the well-educated laboring subjects can only unfold their creativity if they are not totally commanded by capital: “immaterial labor does not require command.”²³ All capital can do is to establish legal barriers and parasitically take surplus value from a system of labor that, as such, could also exist without capital.

One could just think of academic publishing corporations as an example: they do not educate their laborers, they get their laborers for free, they do not control and command the productive subjects; instead, they steal the access rights from academic authors, sell the latter's products for a lot of money, create ideologies of "status" and "hierarchy" as well as legally fence in and rent out (via online fees and library access) the products of academics who—at least in principle—no longer need the publishing industries for their labor. As Negri sums up, "what happens on the web, and the way in which public and private rights enter into conflict with common practices, is now a daily phenomenon."²⁴ The commons *could* exist (via free and open online libraries and cooperative publishing platforms). The exodus of the multitude²⁵ becomes possible *because* of contemporary social and economic realities, which *could* provide a common ground, provide new subjective desires, and be built upon "subjects' capacity of expression."²⁶ Labor becomes increasingly autonomous from capital and, via networks and cooperative nature, we see a new "figure of the *common potentiality* of labor"²⁷ as the "*potenza* of the general intellect"²⁸ emerging: "Capital is, rather, always a relationship of power, and machinery itself (subsumed by social capital) is itself a relationship. This relationship cannot be defined deterministically. It is struggle and conflict, it is a historical assemblage—and hence open-ended—of victories and defeats: this is where politics lives; and the changes, the effects of struggle, the workers' bodies' being 'within or beyond' are variables, dynamics, ontologically defined with the passing of time."²⁹

Since life in its entirety has been subjected to capital accumulation, biopolitics, which now contains entire populations, is the new field of class struggle, even though the new forms of class conflict can no longer be arranged along the lines of factories and factory workers. It is clear, then, that for Negri the potential struggle lines can *only* be defined from within capital and labor. "Living labor is the internal force that constantly poses not only the subversion of the capitalist process of production but also the construction of an alternative."³⁰

Given the intellectualization of labor, communication itself becomes productive,³¹ and it is therefore absolutely coherent to assume that the political subjects are determined and defined by these communicative capacities that, in turn, are the result of the general intellect, science, and common production. "But communication is life. In advanced capitalism, therefore, conflict, struggle and diversity are focused on communication, with capital, by means of communication, trying to preconstitute the determinants of life."³²

As we will see in the next section, Badiou does not pay *any* attention to what, from a Marxist point of view, is the *fundamental* connection among forms of labor, forms of subjectivity, and forms of political struggle. Seen

from this point of view, Badiou is an anti-Marxist thinker insofar as he claims that the “true” political subject is defined from *outside* the system. In contradistinction, Negri has it in the following way: “But this is not the case: capitalism is fought both *within* and *against*; it does not permit an ‘outside,’ and this is because the adversary of living labour is not simply the abstract figure of exploitation reshaped in the continuity of the circuits of the labour process, but the concrete figure of the capitalist who sucks out surplus labour.”³³

Badiou: Society Does Not Exist

In contradistinction to Negri, Badiou’s ontology—which excludes the social as irrelevant to truth—is characterized by the central concept of “the event.” Events are truth-related occurrences that restructure the entire reality. Badiou assumes that there are four such events that constitute truth, namely, politics, art, science, and love. Events cannot be foreseen strategically and they bring about a “truth procedure” that carries with itself a radical restructuring of everything that exists within historical situations, which, as such, remain singular. Events cannot be planned or instrumentally brought about; yet if they occur, the reality of a singular situation changes in its relations and its utterances, as well as with respect to the things that make up this singular situation itself. Truths establish themselves retroactively.

As we can already notice here, the social does not appear on Badiou’s list of truth-relevant events; instead, it is treated, particularly in relation to politics, as a secondary area, given that for Badiou political events are ultimately constituted *outside* of existing social-economic frameworks. Accordingly, politics is an event that functions as the ultimate ground of the social, indeed as *external* to the social insofar as social organization is always rooted in historically relevant (re)organizations of the social reality through “true” thought as politics. As such, events and, in particular, political events are characterized as being beyond any historical transitions. The new is described in terms such as “rupture,” “sudden emergence,” or “explosion.”³⁴ These are clear indicators of Badiou’s extreme thesis that politics can be thought of as being *outside* of, and *external* to, any social determination.³⁵ Truth-events, we might say, seem to come from *nowhere*. The possibility of truth in politics or of a true politics is, accordingly, *always* possible, even if a given situation makes such an event of reorganization unlikely or improbable.

It comes as no surprise, then, that for Badiou Marxism is neither a philosophy nor a theory but *only* a political praxis that is constituted

through “truth.” Marxism is a politics that is thought of in name of the idea of equality: “Genuine Marxism, which is identified with rational political struggle for an egalitarian organization of society, doubtless began around 1848.”³⁶ Badiou’s extremely reductive position is nicely visible in the following passage: “Marxism . . . is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of ‘social reality’), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is ‘communism.’”³⁷

Regardless of the question of how, in the previous statement, we are supposed to understand “collective organization,” this extreme view of Marxism as praxis, even when it is no longer thought of within the party paradigm, reduces the entire theoretical and scientific side of Marxism to a political project instead of understanding it as a dialectics of praxis *and* theory, as Marx did.³⁸ Consequently, the critique of political economy, labor, contemporary forms of capitalism, and so on disappear from Badiou’s radar screen. In short, for Badiou, society has no reality and does not belong to reality because, in all of its aspects, society is the *effect* of politics, which brings about social organization. In this vision, we might add, society is *only* political organization. Consequently, Marxism must be taken as a movement that—independent from all socially determining factors—either reorganizes the entire reality or is meaningless.

This reduction of Marxism to politics, consequently, comes along with Badiou’s rejection of social theory and his ahistorical and reductive version of capitalism, which is especially visible in Badiou’s reduction of capital, capitalism, and other categories of society to something that is irrelevant for ontology.³⁹ According to Badiou, capitalism, for example, is a “regime of gangsters,” driven by profit and greed and characterized by privatization.⁴⁰ Capital is simply defined as a “nihilistic” principle through which the market expands globally, formalizes communication, and leads to the hegemony of the United States⁴¹ Instead of analyzing capitalism as a system of social organization that is characterized by a specific set of social-economic categories, as well as by the central category of life, Badiou offers only general platitudes for understanding it. Reflections on the specific social form of social reproduction and the subjectivities that it brings about are missing since, for Badiou, political subjects are not constituted within the system but come from the outside.

The coming social formation, a postcapitalist world, need not be thought of as a different social organization of labor and society, according to Badiou; rather, it purely reorganizes itself in political terms, which are

based on the “force of an idea,”⁴² namely, communism. This idea constitutes and addresses individuals, according to Badiou, as political subjects who project the egalitarian idea onto a nonexistent history and thereby militantly reorganize reality.⁴³ Indeed, according to Badiou, the political subject is “a militant of this truth” through the “incorporation” of the idea.⁴⁴ Faith and conviction are its central elements: “A politics is,” as he puts it, “an active and organized conviction, a thought in action that indicates unseen possibilities.”⁴⁵ The individual goes through a process of “subjectivation.”⁴⁶ Indeed, “the communist idea,” as Badiou has it, “is what constitutes the becoming-political Subject of the individual as also and at the same time his or her projection into history.”⁴⁷ According to Badiou’s idealism, through this political baptism and renewal of isolated and “animalistic” bodies, these bodies now belong to a new order. As Badiou phrases it, “without the idea, the only thing left is an animalized humanity. Capitalism thereby is the animalization of the human beast, who no longer lives except in terms of its interests and what it deems to be its due. This animalization is extremely dangerous because it is devoid of values and laws.”⁴⁸

Badiou’s view of capitalism as “animalization,” its reduction to an apocalyptic nihilist system, and its definition as a life without idea should remind us of a mix of Christian theology, extreme speciesism, Heideggerian views of modernity, and Platonic essentialism. “The idea,” as Badiou puts it elsewhere, “is that which makes the life of an individual, a human animal, orient itself according to the True” and capitalism is portrayed as a system in which people live without the idea (of the True).⁴⁹ Capitalism is here characterized by a spiritual downfall onto our own flesh and meaningless life, which only the baptism by *the* idea can redeem. Moreover, the subjection to “the” idea of communism is here introduced as a form of “possession.” Adrien Johnston properly calls this a figure of grace.⁵⁰ The subjection of the body to an idea is nothing else than the *total* control of that body. In reality, however, even if we imagine a situation in which the current political system becomes unstable, it will not be simply the idea that will rule over bodies; instead, we will need to take into account the idea’s *social* form, that is, its *mediation* by leaders, different levels of organizations (even if not the party), political technologies, embodied practices, and communication technologies (which, in turn, presuppose a social system of knowledge, knowledge production, productive forces at a specific historical level, and so on). Moreover, without some kind of knowledge about how to reorganize the *social* world, all political ideas will remain empty.⁵¹ Even if we believed that Badiou’s abstract notion of “the” communist idea injected into bodies makes *any* sense, we would however still need to take into account that this idea would need to go through an entire system of relations of

production and its accompanying social relations before it could enter and steer bodies toward the golden land. As a consequence of his a-subjective concept of the subject, Badiou's political subject is at its base, in contrast to Negri's, neither productive nor creative.

Badiou wants us to become reborn communists in the hope that the idea of communism will turn our meaningless lives into spiritualized subjects who overcome their animalized individuality by turning into fighters for the truth. This image of "church soldiers" is very central to Badiou's "visions" insofar as the Badiouan communist soldiers do not simply liberate us from the dynamics of capital domination but, instead, free us from the downfall of civilization, turn us around spiritually, and save us from our "animalization." Needless to say, all of these terms are also used on the far right. Moreover, all stages of Badiou's political thinking are structured by hierarchies. Everything is conceived top-down: first the idea, then the political axiom, then the concrete directive, then the procedures, then the consequences, and so on. All this reminds one more of machine-like party politics and its total discipline than of what contemporary social organizations in all their pluralistic expressions are and can be about.

The underlying authoritarian tone in Badiou's theorizing is more than disturbing. Social communication, plural forms of resistance, and a nonhierarchical organization of social movements are absent. As he put it in a recent interview, "the people have nothing except their discipline."⁵² This might be true for the poorest populations on earth, and it might have had some ramifications during the anticolonial wars, but it is very unlikely that a Maoist revolution would lead anywhere in advanced technological societies. One needs more than political "discipline" to move toward a socialist society, which includes technical experts, educated individuals, ethical visions, and knowledge. Put differently, it requires *more* than empty and abstract political agents; namely, it needs historically specific *social individuals*. In sum, Badiou's collectivist vision of a mass that marches behind a leading idea, that is, a "collective life under the sway of the idea"⁵³ is, given the experiences of the twentieth century, truly frightening insofar as one wonders what would happen to those who may not want to subject themselves to Badiou's collectivist idea. We should note that it is only a small step from Badiou's talk about "animalization" to the logic of political cleansing given that, as a consequence of their status as "beasts" and "bodies without truth," those who do not want to subject themselves to the communist idea in a communist future could easily be called "pest" and insects."

The frightening aspect of Badiou's thinking is further evidenced by his claim that communism "will gradually reduce all the 'big differences' in terms of social organization: differences between the city and the country, rich and

poor, manual and intellectual labor, women and men.”⁵⁴ In addition, Badiou claims that labor division⁵⁵ will be overcome.⁵⁶ If one imagines a world without any of these differences, then one must come to the conclusion that it is modeled after small religious (agrarian) communities that are held together both by unified labor and by religious faith in what constitutes the spirituality of this community. The (communist) religion must be one-dimensional. In this vein, the idea that overcoming class division also overcomes labor division is highly doubtful, as our complex societies require at least a minimum of socially necessary labor time, which will, I submit, be characterized by *extreme* labor division (and time off for voluntary labor).⁵⁷ As Adorno put it in 1968, the call for an abolishment of labor division is “regressive romanticism.”⁵⁸ Badiou’s call for abolishing labor division echoes attempts by the early Soviets to eradicate all specialists for the sake of collectivization and, I submit, is naïve and destructive, given the current level of labor division and sociological analysis in our contemporary societies. In addition, Marx himself argues, in his critique of the *Gotha Program*, that labor division and unequal distributions are necessary for a socialist society.

What Badiou pushes aside in what he presents as a self-evident interpretation of Marxism as a primarily political project is Marx’s critique, in his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, of a simple-minded egalitarian position and the idea of communist social organization as a form of radical *individualism*, in which the individual does *not* become identical with the collective. As Negri puts it, political expressions of the multitude can be multifarious: “The multitude’s unity of action is the multiplicity of expressions it is capable of.”⁵⁹ Negri is much closer to Marx’s position than Badiou is. According to Negri, total egalitarianism is less central; communism is defined as “radical economic-political democracy and a search for freedom.”⁶⁰ This is because “labor is defined ontologically as freedom through the common: labor is productive when it is free, otherwise it is dead, and it is free only when it is common.”⁶¹

In addition, Badiou claims “that human societies do not need to be governed by the principle of private interest.”⁶² This claim is also highly doubtful, as its underlying assumption is that the individual interests and the collective interests become *one and the same*, that the individual is *totally* absorbed by the whole, that rights are no longer needed, and that all conflicts can be solved without the intrusion of law and institutions that are positioned *between* the individual and the collective. The individual no longer counts, if we take into account that individuals express themselves by individual desires, wants, and *interests*. Badiou’s claim that all of this ultimately leads to a “healthy” society seems to follow a dangerous *logic of eradication* that we have seen in action during the twentieth century but,

as Andreas Arndt has pointed out, this position has nothing to do with Marx.⁶³ Finally, Badiou is a legal positivist, if not even—as others of the radical left before him have been—a *legal nihilist*, for the law is reduced to an instrument of the *status quo* and an instrument of the state⁶⁴; and any normative elements and rights of *individuals* that could point toward the *transcendence* of the given social organization and to the expression of freedom are reduced to what Althusser called the repressive state apparatuses. For example, Badiou states that the establishment of international law might have “some demonstrable merit,” but that this does not “represent any progress in terms of political intelligibility.”⁶⁵

Badiou on Negri on Badiou

Given Badiou’s political projections, we can easily see why and how Badiou positions himself in opposition to Negri on almost all levels of thinking about society and the political. To Badiou’s mind, the question of the political is not a question about classes, movements, and other agents; rather, as he argues against Negri, it is a question of how to organize a mass under the heading of an idea. The antiglobalization movement, for example, is rejected as operating within the system. Thus, protesting at a G20 meeting does not make sense, according to this position, because it requires one to remain too close to the operations of capital. If we follow this position all the way to its end, then we need to conclude that any attempt to develop alternatives to the current economic system, such as degrowth, steady state economy, new climate technologies, and so on, all remain within the system and, hence, they are considered by Badiou as *meaningless*, that is, spiritless, since this is only a reconfiguration of the same.⁶⁶ “And it is not the sympathetic and unavoidable language of movementist democracy that will save us. ‘Down with this or that,’ ‘all together we will win,’ ‘get out,’ ‘resistance!,’ ‘it is right to rebel.’ . . . All of this is capable of momentarily summoning forth collective affects, and, tactically, this is all very useful—but it leaves the question of a legible strategy entirely unresolved. This is too poor a language for a situated discussion of the future of emancipatory actions.”⁶⁷ As he puts it even more forcefully, “Politics is the real of communism, in all of its forms. *Everything else* is a matter of the state, of managing things.”⁶⁸

What kind of politics is *really* heterogeneous to what capital demands?—that is today’s question. Our politics is situated at the heart of things, in the factories, in a direct relation with employers and with capital. But it remains a matter of politics—that is

to say, of thought, of statements, of practices. All the efforts to construct an alternative economy strike me as pure and simple abstractions, if not simply driven by the unconscious vector of capital's own reorganization. We can see, for example—and will see more and more—how so many environmentalist demands simply provide capital with new fields of investment, new inflections and new deployments. Why? Because every proposition that directly concerns the economy can be assimilated by capital. This is so by definition, since capital is indifferent to the qualitative configuration of things. So long as it can be transformed or aligned in terms of market value, everything's fine. The only strategy worth the name is a political struggle—that is to say, a singular, active subjectivity, a thought-praxis.⁶⁹

It comes as no surprise, then, that Badiou rejects Negri's dialectical position in its entirety:

We have on the one side the definition of democracy as a form of the state, and on the other, democracy as an immanent determination of the collective movement. But I think the classical opposition of state and movement is saturated. We cannot simply oppose state oppression or the oppressive system with, on the other side, the creativity of the movement. That's an old concept, not a new one. We have to find a new concept of democracy, one that is outside the opposition of formal democracy (which is democracy as form of state) and concrete democracy (which is the democracy of the popular movement). Negri remains inside this classical opposition, while using other names: Empire for state, multitude for movement. But new names are not new things.⁷⁰

For Negri, social ontology is primary and, as a consequence, communism and its possibility cannot be thought of without understanding *from where* and *in what social form* they are possible.⁷¹ Communism is a *potentiality*. Badiou's thinking of the event is opposed to this idea that the future must be grounded in the present for the event comes from nowhere. However, an ecologically sustainable society or a society that organizes the commons without private property cannot be reduced to a merely political organization, as Badiou seems to assume, since it requires well-educated subjects, certain institutions that form it, administrative institutions, and specific organizations of labor and technologies that cannot be brought about through politics

alone. Since Badiou reduces the political subject to an embodied idea, all social aspects are removed from it.

In contradistinction, Negri argues that “without historical ontology there is no communism.”⁷² Contra Badiou, Negri poses the following:

We have to understand, then, whether and to what extent, within this variation of different positions, there sometimes emerge positions that, in the name of the universality of the proposed political project, oppose ontological praxis—for example by denying the historicity of categories such as “primitive accumulation” and consequently by proposing the hypothesis of communism as a pure and immediate restoration of the commons; or by devaluing the productive transformations that configure in various ways the “technical composition” of labor power (which is real and actual production of materialist subjectivity in the relationship between relations of production and forces of production) and by asserting that the root of communist protest is simply human nature (always the same, *sub forma arithmetica*)—and so forth: this is clearly an ambiguous repackaging of idealism in its transcendental aspect.⁷³

Negri argues against abstract definitions of egalitarianism or communism: “the universal is an abstraction from subjects isolated from each other, whereas the commons is that which each subject can build”; that is, the difference between individual and collective has to be maintained.⁷⁴ “The foundation of democracy (and, without contradiction, the foundation of communism) is not the development of equality, but the freedom of the individual, as a positive, cooperative action.”⁷⁵

Conclusion

To return to the events described at the beginning of this essay, we can see that Negri’s philosophy allows us to see the positive, the new, the creative, and the *potentiality* in the G20 protests, whereas in Badiou’s world protest marches are nothing more than a perverted affirmation of the world of capital and therefore should be dismissed.⁷⁶ We should note, though, that Badiou would classify the destructive riots that occurred in connection with the G20 and the Black Bloc(k) as an “immediate riot,” that is, as one with limited spatial extent and without concept (*idea*).⁷⁷ In contrast,

Negri argues that “constituent power is defined here: where the multitude seeks to construct itself anew through subjectivity, and the virtual thus presents itself as more real than the real. Constituent power is not something that is prefigured. . . . It is the efficacy of the struggle, of the claims of the multitude, of the *Potenza* of its movements—this is what invents and constitutes new reality.”⁷⁸ Negri is here close to Marx’s famous claim that “mankind . . . inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.”⁷⁹ However, this view requires us to see and lay open the *potentialities* within the given; that is, it requires a return to a dialectical theory of social reality and a dialectical theory of the relation between theory and praxis. This is to say that we need *critical* concepts of technology, postgrowth, money, and sustainable economic visions. Badiou’s political philosophy remains disappointing in this regard. Accordingly, we do not need to wait for the big rupture. Communism is, as Marx told us, the real movement of history: whether we know it or not.

Notes

1. One week after the meeting, Germany and France announced that they would build a new “European” fighter jet with increased military budgets and the German government approved new multibillion-dollar military technology sales (boats, trucks, armor) to Saudi Arabia and a U-Boat deal with Egypt. In the meantime, the Turkish government—with the help of more than 8,500 police officers—carried out further overnight repressive actions against around 1,000 critical journalists, academics, and artists. By now (as of this writing), Turkey has put more than 40,000 people in prison and laid off more than 120,000 people as a result of the military coup against the Turkish government in July 2016, primarily in the academic and legal systems. In most cases, all this took place without any legal protection for the victims.

2. Colin Cremin and John Michael Roberts, “Postmodern Left-Liberalism: Hardt and Negri and the Disavowal of Critique,” *Critical Sociology* 37, 2 (2011): 180.

3. For Sartre’s dismissal of social-economic considerations and his focus on political strategy, see the very enlightening interview in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, trans. John Mathews (New York: Pantheon Books, 1974), 118–140.

4. Quoted in Gavin Walker, “On Marxism’s Field of Operations: Badiou and the Critique of Political Economy,” *Historical Materialism* 20, 2 (2012): 46; see also Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. J. Barker (London: Verso, 2006), 73.

5. For more on this, see Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), and “Marx contra Negri: Value, Abstract Labor, and Money,” in *Contemporary Political Italian Philosophy*, ed. Antonio Calcagno (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

6. Antonio Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, trans. Ed Emery (London: Polity Press, 2017), 32.

7. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 4.

8. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 37.

9. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 2.

10. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 30.

11. For more on this, see Christian Lotz, *Christian Lotz zu Karl Marx: Das Maschinenfragment* (Hamburg: Laika Verlag, 2014).

12. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 44.

13. In contrast, Negri writes: “If we want to describe the political transitions taking place in the age of communication technologies and socialized knowledge, in the age of the postmodern biopolitical, we have to remember that the fundamental element traversing this reality is living labor as it places its hegemony in intellectual and affective, cooperative and excedent action” (Antonio Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, trans. Ed Emery [London: Polity Press, 2010], 164).

14. Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1; for this, see also Negri, *Insurgencies*, 323.

15. Antonio Negri, *The Winter is Over: Writings on Transformation Denied, 1989–1995*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson, ed. Giuseppe Caccia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), 137.

16. Negri, *Insurgencies*, 11.

17. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 31.

18. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 39.

19. Negri and Hardt, *Labor of Dionysus*, 13.

20. Negri and Hardt, *Labor of Dionysus*, 21.

21. Negri, *The Winter Is Over*, 117. On a side note, this position also has consequences for the Marxist theory of the state since the state is no longer, as for example Poulantzas claimed, the proper center of intellectual labor (see Negri, *The Winter Is Over*, 116); rather, it expands over the entire society.

22. Antonio Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, trans. Ed Emery (London: Polity Press, 2008), 107.

23. Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, 106.

24. Antonio Negri, *The Porcelain Workshop: For A New Grammar of Politics*, trans. Noura Wedell (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), 69.

25. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 40.

26. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 41.

27. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 52.

28. Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, 112.

29. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 46.
30. Negri and Hardt, *Labor of Dionysus*, 6.
31. Negri, *The Winter Is Over*, 133.
32. Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*, trans. James Newell (London: Polity Press, 2005), 118.
33. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 53.
34. For this, see Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2009), 6.
35. Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, 7.
36. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 8.
37. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 8.
38. Badiou rejects that the idea of communism is dialectical; see Alain Badiou, *Philosophie und die Idee des Kommunismus. Im Gespräch mit Peter Engelmann* (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2014), 45; thereby, he rejects the ideas presented in Marx's and Engel's *Manifesto*.
39. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 12.
40. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 13.
41. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (New York: Continuum, 2005), 120.
42. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 15.
43. Alain Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," in *The Idea of Communism*, ed. Costas Douzinas and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2010), 3–5.
44. Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," 3.
45. Alain Badiou, "Our Contemporary Impotence," *Radical Philosophy* 181 (September–October 2013): 45.
46. Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," 3.
47. Badiou, "The Idea of Communism," 4.
48. Alain Badiou, *Philosophy and the Event*, trans. Louise Burchill (London: Polity Press, 2013), 35.
49. Alain Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Louise Burchill (London: Polity Press, 2011), 105.
50. Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations*, 18.
51. Astonishingly, despite his dismissive gesture toward Arendt (see Alain Badiou, "The Saturated Generic Identity of the Working Class," 2006, <http://inter-activist.autonomeia.org/node/5400>, chap. 1), Badiou comes very close to Arendt's preference for the political as the true realm of freedom over the social understood as the realm of necessities and the reproduction of life. In contrast, for Negri, freedom must be *part of the labor process* (see Negri, *Empire and Beyond*, 164–166).
52. Badiou, *Philosophie und die Idee des Kommunismus*, 82.
53. Alain Badiou, *Controversies: A Dialogue on the Politics and Philosophy of Our Time*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Polity Press, 2014), 12, 157.
54. Alain Badiou, *Confrontation: Alain Badiou Alain Finkielkraut*, trans. Susan Spitzer (London: Polity Press, 2014), 116.

55. Badiou, *Confrontation*, 97.

56. Badiou seems to have shifted his position in recent publications. In Alain Badiou, *Bedingungen und Unendlichkeit. Ein Gespräch mit Gernot Kamecke*, trans. Gernot Kamecke (Berlin: Merve, 2015), 126, he states that the idea of communism is based on (1) a form of politics that cannot be transformed into a state, (2) an idea of egalitarianism as the overcoming of class division, and (3) resistance to the view that the entire world is controlled by private property. All these points sound more reasonable than some of the earlier definitions. However, given these shifts, we can see how the concept of “idea” remains an empty placeholder for many things and Badiou nowhere explains why “the” idea must be the idea of communism and not, for example, the libertarian or fascist idea.

57. “‘Communism’ signifies the *historical hypothesis* according to which it is not necessary that freedom be ruled by property, and human societies be directed by a strict oligarchy of powerful businessmen and their servants in politics, the police, the military and the media. A society is possible in which what Marx calls ‘free association’ predominates, where productive labour is collectivized, where the disappearance of the great non-egalitarian contradictions (between intellectual and manual labour, between town and country, between men and women, between management and labour, etc. . . .) is under way, and where decisions that concern everyone are really everyone’s business. We should treat this egalitarian possibility as a principle of thought and action, and not let go of it” (Badiou, “Our Contemporary Impotence,” 46).

58. Theodor W. Adorno, “Frankfurter Adorno Blätter VI,” ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Edition Text & Kritik, 2000), 146.

59. Negri, *The Porcelain Workshop*, 67.

60. Negri, *The Winter Is Over*, 199.

61. Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, 107; see also 166.

62. Badiou, *Confrontation*, 112.

63. For this, see Andreas Arndt, *Geschichte und Freiheitsbewusstsein: Zur Dialektik der Freiheit bei Hegel und Marx* (Berlin: Eule der Minerva, 2015), 154.

64. Badiou, *Bedingungen und Unendlichkeit*, 75.

65. Badiou, *Controversies*, 55; emphasis added.

66. Badiou, “Our Contemporary Impotence,” 4.

67. Badiou, “Our Contemporary Impotence,” 45.

68. Badiou 2014, *Controversies*, 23; emphasis added. In a recent article, Gavin Walker provides a reconstruction of Badiou’s political and intellectual background in French radical politics in the 1960s, namely, the *Groupe Yenan-économie*: “By what miracle today is technology able to avoid capitalism by developing social relations in labour of an entirely different nature, of a socialist nature? This miracle only exists in the heads of the revisionists. Today, automation does nothing but prolong the essential tendencies studied by Marx. It does not make any point as a decisive rupture” (quoted in Walker, “On Marxism’s Field of Operations,” 59).

69. Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2002), 106.

70. Alain Badiou, “The Saturated Generic Identity of the Working Class.”

71. “First off, the systematic recourse to constitutional reforms that are proposed at the European level certainly plays the role of an obstacle here. What interests the movements, by contrast, is to ask what political actions can be put to work to favor the processes of subjectivization that are adapted to a new subversive and communist project” (Antonio Negri, “From the End of National Lefts to Subversive Movements for Europe,” *Radical Philosophy* 181 [September–October 2013]: 31).

72. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 73.

73. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 75.

74. Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 73.

75. Negri, *The Winter Is Over*, 149.

76. Negri sees this point clearly: “For him [Badiou], indeed, every mass movement is a petty bourgeois performance and every immediate struggle, whether of material or cognitive labour, of the class or of ‘social labour’ [*lavoro sociale*] is something that will never touch the substance of power—every enlargement of the collective productive capacity of proletarian subjectivity will be merely an extension of their subjection to the logic of the system; thus the object is unattainable, the subject is undefineable—unless theory produces it, to discipline it, to adapt it to truth and to raise it to the level of event, beyond political practice, beyond history” (Negri, *Marx and Foucault*, 76).

77. Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 21.

78. Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, 110.

79. Marx and Engels, *Werke*, 13:9.