

Review for *Politica Comun*

The Actuality of Communism

Bruno Bosteels

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Bruno Bosteels' estimably lucid assessment recent communist thought ("the idea of communism" or "the communist hypothesis" (depending on the landmark volume, conference, or Verso series taken as touchstone) opens with a reminder of the most incisive definition on offer, from *The German Ideology*: "We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things [*die wirkliche Bewegung, welche den jetzigen Zustand aufhebt*]." [Bosteels 17]

In attuning its study to recent conceptual trajectories of this real movement, the book does not mean to be a particularly historical account. Nonetheless it implies a certain historical sequence within which such thought might be located, ending as the concept undergoes significant and compelling mutation and leaps toward its actuality. The assessment of this last movement offers the volume's novelty and its greatest virtue; it is the leap's inevitable incompleteness which suggests a limit to the account.

Because the book is not a chronological or genealogical telling, the underlying historical development must be for the moment understood as a secondary feature. The earliest passage falls in a desolate scenario following on the disastrous fallout of 1968's failures (and perhaps worse, its successes): the reapportioning of revolution to the realm of the personal; the global defeat of workers' movements; and the shamed retreat of intellectuals from any institutional or intellectual taint of Stalinism, with the

concomitant turn away from direct analyses of capitalism among the remnants of the European left, now unevenly divided among provocative poststructuralists, sincere New Leftists, and halfwit *nouveaux philosophes*. In this era, political-theoretical communism is kept alive among relatively few thinkers and publishers: a distributed Iona monastery of late modernity, sustaining hermetic knowledge within its cloisters.

Forced into such preserves beyond any positive social content or struggle, the risk of such thought is the development of what Bosteels identifies as "speculative leftism," one of two post-Althusserian developments (alongside latter-day Zhdanovism – "speculative rightism" in Bosteels' witty formulation) that "comes to represent an uncompromising purification of the notion of communism, not so much as the abolition but rather as the complete tabula rasa of the present state of things, including all classes, parties, and ideological apparatuses of the State." [20] Such thought presents, that is to say, communism absent actuality, a speculative deviation which becomes communism's internal other. This dialectic replaces the propositionally defunct dialectic of communism and socialism – the latter term agreed by all parties to have been evacuated of historical salience, having failed or been folded into the congeries of parliamentary-electoral capitalism.

This being a dialectical relationship, Bosteels is at pains to give speculative leftism its due. It is "not just the name for an ideological deviation to be corrected by following the correct line of communism; it also and at the same time serves as a possible passageway through which philosophy communicates with the struggles, desires, and impulses that define its actuality." [30]

It will turn out there is good cause for such a nuanced position, beyond the agitated shuttling between recto and verso of the dialectic itself. Speculative leftism is diagnosed and critiqued first by Ranciere as early as 1974, and then again by the Badiou of *Being and Event* as a formalism alienated from its historical situation: in Badiou's terms, "[t]his imaginary wager upon an absolute novelty – "to break in two the history of the world" – fails to recognize that the real of the conditions of possibility of intervention is always the circulation of an already decided event." [Bosteels 24] But such verdicts bear a profound ambiguity, if not an outright irony, regarding the formulations of these thinkers themselves – an irony of which Bosteels is keenly aware. The first lineaments of this reversal begin to take shape during what is in some regard the most bravura passage of the study, in which Bosteels sets forth a largely synchronic mapping of the political thought of Ranciere and Badiou, as well as significant thinkers Roberto Esposito and Alberto Moreiras, via their applications of various prefixes to the word "political."

Against the ideological phantasm of "postpolitics" which propagates within the modern dark ages, Ranciere sets his troika of prefixes. Each provides both an appropriation and a neutralization of the political; each passes through the question of subjectivization in its own way; and each is conjugated with a political philosopher and with positive characteristics. Respectively, *archi-*, *para-*, and *metapolitics* are associated with Plato and the living order of republican community; Aristotle/Hobbes and sovereign power; Marx and class struggle.

In contradistinction to this *prix fixe* menu, Esposito and Moreiras contribute *impolitical* and *infrapolitics*: fundamentally negative understandings that take politics as a non-political category and, in so doing, expose it to "its

ground and its reverse side," in Esposito's formulation [69], and per Moreiras, enable the possibility of the nonsubject. In so doing, they offer a differing, negative epistemology for the political and a provisional escape from its horizons – albeit one that must dispense with the categories that have proven themselves inadequate to the modernity. These departures from the ground of the political qua category correspond, one can't help but remark, with the failure of politics qua practice to have a substantive ground in the moment of Moreiras and Esposito; in this, they join Ranciere and Badiou in a manifold meditation on failure.

In orienting these thinkers transversally, Bosteels provides a generous service to those who are not adepts in recent political philosophy, while at the same time raising the question of what the stakes might be for his larger inquiry. An answer presents itself in in the following chapters, which return more directly to Ranciere (a Ranciere without prefixes, as it were), Badiou (with his own *Metapolitics*, notably antagonistic to Ranciere's), and Zizek. These finally are the three names most associated with the return of the communist idea in the period after 2001.

It is a curious return indeed, particularly in its European and indeed Parisian epicenter. It provides, without a doubt, a welcome counter to the regnant strains of political theory: the durable and westward-drifting tradition of *realpolitik* handed down from Westphalia, and the complementary discourse associated with Carl Schmitt's problematics of sovereignty, the friend/enemy distinction, and so forth. It is a return allowed by the dramatic conclusion of the United States' last *belle époque* and the concomitant dissolution of its global hegemony into coercion and turbulence: against this flux, the communist hypothesis becomes again speakable and, more significantly, audible.

But this flourishing of the communist idea resembles less an orchid than an air plant suspended above the earth, lacking the practical soil of social struggle.

Because of this, the risk of an arid formalism still obtains. It is here that the book's dialectical cunning around the question of speculative leftism reveals its true purpose, as it becomes clear that Ranciere, Badiou (and perhaps to a lesser extent Zizek as well), having stood as critics of speculative leftism, may be as well the bearers of its limitations. Ranciere has wandered far from the historical ground of, e.g., *Nights of Labor* (still his most remarkable work). Badiou, for all his admonishing of speculative leftism's distance from the historical real, inclines ever more toward a philosophical self-consistency soliciting suspicions of, in Ranciere's own formulation, "aestheticism." [Bosteels 138].

This is not to suggest that Bosteels is ungenerous to these masters (indeed, I would suggest that he is needlessly generous to Zizek, forgiving his iterative superproduction as a kind of pedagogy; it would be more accurate to say that Zizek has adopted a practice of trying to say everything, shutting along all possible routes of the Hegel-Marx-Lacan triangle, and to do so in varying triplicate, so as to be assured of periodically getting it right – and has succeeded). He offers a case for their attention to the historical, with particular admiration for Badiou's writings on the Paris Commune and Mao's Cultural Revolution. Nonetheless, the unstated sense is that these thinkers ought be admired at least partially not for grasping communism's real kernel but for holding open "a possible passageway through which philosophy communicates with the struggles, desires, and impulses that define its actuality."

This then sets the stage for the book's greatest contribution: the leap from *communication* (which we may now take to be the transitive logic of the philosophers) into *actuality*. This is simultaneously a leap from Europe to South America, and specifically to the thought and situation of Álvaro García Linera: mathematician, sociologist, convicted terrorist, and Bolivian vice president, as well as the author of a series of texts from the Marxian writings of *Value Form and Community Form* to the more recent collection *The Plebeian Potential*. García Linera appears as the escape route from left melancholia and the endless meditations on defeat that have dominated left thought in the last four decades, offering actual political ground for his direct assertion, "The general horizon of the era is communist." [Bosteels 197] The price to paid for the near-immediacy of this non-speculative communism is what we might designate as *paracommunism*:

But at this moment it is clear that this is not an immediate horizon, which centers on the conquest of equality, the redistribution of wealth, the broadening of rights [...] we enter the movement with our expecting and desiring eyes set upon the communist horizon. But we were serious and objective, in the social sense of the term, by signaling the limits of the movement. [197-198]

That is to say, the problematic of transition, the historical moment of inflection for the tensions between communism and socialism, has now – in the purported obsolescence of that opposition – been transcoded such that actual communism is that which provides a logic of transition, notably lacking from speculative leftism. It might do so precisely because the historical ground of Bolivia provides a renewed substance to the subject of "the plebe": a static figure for speculative leftism, but here a "motley" moving dynamically between the poles of the cultural-symbolic and the socio-economic described elsewhere

by García Linera as "the two revolutionary rationales" of "Indianismo and Marxism." It is this revitalization that reopens the communist horizon, associated here with the "Real not just in the sense of impossible – we can never reach it – but also in the sense of the actual format, condition, and shape of our setting." [199]

This is, among Bosteels' many astute conceptual couplings, perhaps the most decisive, completing the slow-building association of *real* with *actual* and thus recirculating Marx and Engels' originary formulation of *die wirkliche Bewegung* as the valorizing logic of Latin America's actual communism. And on first glance this seems self-evident: Marx, most often inclined to the German word *real*, here prefers *wirkliche* with its secondary sense of "actual."

This association of "the real movement of history" with an actual communist episode in a new or renewed situation might be said to be the potentiality that the book raises. For this we should be doubly grateful, for it is the correct question at once conceptually and historically (or philosophically and politically, if one so prefers).

Having carefully separated out early on this real movement from "the saturated forms of movement and party-State," [20] the book allows this association of the two *movements* to return during the final chapter:

[U]nless the communist hypothesis is to be left to shine for eternity with all the untimely brilliance of a Platonic or Kantian Idea, communism must not only be rehistoricized outside all suppositions of historical necessity and stageism, it must also be actualized and organized as the real movement that abolishes the present state of things. In other words, communism must again find inscription in a concrete body, the

collective flesh and thought of an internationalist political subjectivity – even if it may no longer be necessary for such an act of subjectivization to pass through the traditional form of the party for its embodiment." [209]

The opposition on offer means rightly to proffer, against philosophical formalism, a "concrete body" which manages to route around the disaster of the party form. However, this engenders a hypostatization of "movement" which the original passage, *die wirkliche Bewegung*, will not so easily allow.

*Bewegung* is without a doubt an ambiguous term in German as "movement" is in English, with senses germane both to political form and to physics. That said, Marx is at pains to use the word in the later sense, as in the first volume of *Capital* where it appears in the phrase "the form of motion." [Penguin edition, 296]. Moreover, *wirkliche* has another secondary sense: that of the intrinsic. Now we confront quite another sense indeed of the formula in question: "the real movement of history" as an intrinsic dynamic, something like the laws of motion by which history moves.

This is not mere philological caviling, I hope. For Marx, the laws of motion in question were in no regard either Platonic/Kantian form or actual political instance, but the motion of the laws of capital as such – in specific the law of value and its ineluctable if uneven movement toward an absolute contradiction between the mode of production and the rate of profit which would eventually burst forth as economic and political crisis so destructive as to abolish the present state of things. One can scarcely ignore that this is precisely what is missing from, say, Badiou's history: his leap from the French Revolution to the Commune is exemplary of his "communism without Marx" and, in a more philosophical register, designates his lack of the very



content of history designated by *die wirkliche Bewegung*. Badiou, one must add, is not the only political philosopher of communism lacking this dimension.

This is not to abandon actuality as finally too compromised by concrete politics against the "invisible essence" of value in the properly Marxian sense. Indeed, the move to rebalance, to *redialecticize* the relation of speculative leftism (which I would call "left formalism") and the actuality of given instances – a task I take to be Bosteels' most vital contribution – is a vital one, which at once apprehends our current moment and is its expression. For if we grasp the real movement as the itinerary of the value form, rather than some idea of communism anterior to it, we see its contradictions have entered a new historical period, of which events in Bolivia are one form of appearance – events in Egypt, in the United States, in Greece and the Eurozone being others. Not all of these are identifiably communist in a sense that many of the thinkers here would recognize – but this is the real movement or it is nothing, and actuality is bursting out all over.

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