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## The Communist Hypothesis; Žižekian Utopia or Utopian Fantasy?

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Although Slavoj Žižek's work has always had a Marxist flavour and has hinted at an affinity with communism, his primary mode of political engagement has remained the critique of capital rather than the re-development of an alternative ideological platform. Parts of Žižek's recent work, however, have begun to overtly engage with communism such that he has been able to speak of it as 'our side' (2009a: 8). This commitment has come in the form of the 'communist hypothesis', developed primarily in his works *How to Begin from the Beginning* (2009b) and *First as Tragedy, then as Farce*, (2009a). Emerging initially from Alain Badiou's *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (2008), the resurgence of communism has resonated strongly with those involved in Leftist political theory, leading to a sold out political conference on '*The Idea of Communism*' – a conference which required, as Badiou narrates, that speakers must agree that "the word communism can and must now acquire a positive value once more" (2010: 37) – and an ensuing collection of essays under the same name (Douzinas & Žižek, 2010).

Badiou has subsequently produced a more focused text, explicitly titled '*The*

*Communist Hypothesis*' (2010) and the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* published a special edition, entitled 'On Žižek's Communism'. The latter, however, focused more upon Žižek's 2008 text, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, in which he sought to rehabilitate 'totalitarian' positions, such as 'revolutionary terror' as a potential response to capitalism and the hegemony of liberalism amongst the Left. Nonetheless the critical and often polemic contributions to this special edition signalled the difficulty of Žižek's evocation of communism in any form: historically, critics' central rebuke of Žižek's politics is that his Lacanian orientation prevents the development or acceptance of political positions that are alternative to capitalism. Moreover, because of this refusal Žižek's politics are often conceived to have an all-or-nothing logic that ultimately leads to a refusal to act indistinguishable from the most stubborn modes of conservatism.

Nonetheless, Žižek's reluctance to venture into ideological waters cannot be solely attributed to the limitations of Lacanian theory but, rather, has been based upon his ontological grasp of the historical limits of subversion within capitalism. That is, Žižek has been reluctant to posit or support any particular ideological platform not so much because of the limitations of these positions – not that Žižek has been recalcitrant in examining these limitations either – but because they will inevitably be caught up in the logic of capital, a logic which has hegemonised hegemony, becoming the consistent background of all shared social life, or, what Žižek has labelled the 'symbolic Real' (Žižek, 2000: 223).

As such, Žižek's primary mode of engagement has been, in Glyn Daly's terms (2010: 15), to 'subvert the logic of subversion' within capitalism through his own dialectical triangulation of Hegel, Marx and Lacan. Thus, Žižek's overt support for communism – an apparent ideological form of politics – marks a step-change from his form of political practice. Yet, having unequivocally quoted Badiou on the communist hypothesis in *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (2009a) Žižek's next major work *Living in End Times* comes to critique Badiou's Idea as if it were entirely foreign to his own work (2010: 182-185). We must consider, therefore, both the significance of the communist hypothesis for the practice of Žižekian theory and its value as a form of politics.

In that regard, in this paper I will seek to consider this communist moment within Žižek's work, from its Badiouian origins to the apparent distance Žižek has established from the latter's 'Idea of Communism', arguing that although 'the communist hypothesis' marks a development within Žižekian theory it can be considered confluent with his previous work in the sense that it proceeds only on the basis of an identification with points of antagonism within capitalism. Moreover, I contend that, despite Žižek's apparent

ambivalence, his reading of communism can be productively extended via a utopian demand around the very limitations of capitalism, an extension that is quite distinct from the ideological contortions of Badiou's Idea.

This response will have cause to move through three considerations. The first pertains to Žižek's initial entry into the field of communism. Here, following Badiou, Žižek considers communism as a hypothesis and one that can only be understood as a response to the contradictions of global capitalism. In this manner, suggesting no ideological content, Žižek's communism appears entirely congruent with his earlier work; an attempt to evoke the disavowed foundations of capital. Yet, despite this development, in his latest text *Living in End Times* (2010), Žižek does not seek to further his own reading of communism and is critical of Badiou's own elaboration.

Badiou has gone on to produce *The Communist Hypothesis*, a collection of essays of which only one directly considers communism. In this section – a reproduction of his paper presented at the *Idea of Communism* conference – he details what he means by the Idea of communism in a manner that goes beyond Žižek's work. Badiou's Idea, taken to be a political procedure in which a subject becomes activated by its embodiment in a political truth within a historical state, attempts to mobilise the tension of the Lacanian Real within the capitalist state. Conversely, Badiou's intervention involves an ideological identification that lies in contradistinction with both the anxiety embodied by the Real and Žižek's mode of engagement. This contrast speaks to diverging perspectives on our ability to perform subversive politics within capitalism; notably, we must consider whether an alternative ideological platform can be developed within capitalism without being subsumed into capital itself.

Here, although suggesting that Badiou's work usefully extends our understanding of Žižek's communism, I contend that the presence of such an Idea risks being caught up with the 'facts' of capitalism, as opposed to the Real tension provided by the truth that both Badiou and Žižek seek to evoke. In this manner, I posit that it is useful to distinguish between Badiou's Idea and Žižek's hypothesis. Moreover, I come to argue that rather than attempting to attribute any positive value to communism, Žižek's consideration of the hypothesis can be best understood as a utopian demand; the third and final consideration.

By way of a Lacanian interpretation of Jameson's work on utopia I suggest two alternate readings of utopia, both of which resonate with a Lacanian conception of *jouissance*. The first and most common conception is the utopia of the ideal, a demand which can be considered homologous with surplus-*jouissance*. An alternative mode of

utopia, however, occurs at the limits of the imaginary. This utopian demand is produced when conditions are deadlocked to a degree that symptoms cannot be resolved within existing co-ordinates, such that new space must be invented. As such, a utopian demand can be located in the position of the 'part with no part' within capitalism, the surplus or reserve army of labour which Žižek's suggests both form the element of universality within capitalism and is the justification for the communist hypothesis. Before developing the link between utopia, *jouissance* and universality in relation to communism, however, I will begin by considering Žižek's initial work on the communist hypothesis.

### **Žižek's Communism: Egalitarian Justice or the Communist Hypothesis**

Whilst Žižek's work is transparently directed as a response to global capitalism, his theoretical interventions have never settled upon an ideological platform which suggests a beyond to this critique. Žižek's commitment to the theoretical tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Hegelian dialectics are readily apparent, as is his positioning within the Marxist tradition, yet the ultimate location of his political commitments has remained a point of academic speculation (see Boucher & Sharpe, 2010; Bowman & Stamp, 2007). Whilst some critics, such as Ernesto Laclau, have come to suggest that Žižek's work is without political outlook because of his commitment to Lacanian analysis (Laclau, 2000: 289), others have come to argue that Žižek's work is replete with an implicit totalitarianism. The latter position was the predominant thrust of a special edition of the *International Journal of Žižek Studies* entitled 'Žižek's Communism', in which a familiar collection of Žižek's critics rounded on his intervention into totalitarianism in the 2008 text, *In Defense of Lost Causes*.

Here Žižek provocatively flaunted his support for a number of 'lost causes'; primarily totalitarian politics, from Mao to Stalin and Heidegger, but, also, the theoretical lost causes of Marxism and psychoanalysis themselves. Yet, although he seeks to rehabilitate the 'kernel of truth' in totalitarian regimes, the central argument of the text is a rethinking of the limitations of liberalism and the end of global ambitions rather than in detailed support for any ideological formation. The text produces a certain style of Žižekian politics; provocative, polemic and aimed largely at destabilising hegemonic assumptions in the name of enabling more radical forms of subversion. Nowhere, however, does Žižek specifically refer to a communist hypothesis or engage in a direct endorsement of communism. Nonetheless, although Žižek does not directly associate terror, or indeed

egalitarianism, with communism, Geoff Boucher and Matthew Sharpe's editorial introduction to the special edition states:

In this edition of the IJZS, the contributors investigate Žižek's claim that his intervention is not a flamboyant posture masking the lack of a definite programme, but a serious contribution to the renewal of the emancipatory project of "egalitarian communism". (2010: 2).

It appears that, for his critics, Žižek's communism lies in his apparent embrace of totalitarian values at the expense of liberal politics. This reading of Žižek's communism is not, however, at all congruent with Žižek's later and more direct consideration of communism, which specifically seeks to subvert any attempt to positively locate communism. Indeed, to suggest that Žižek's positions in *In Defense of Lost Causes* are communist is a retrospective reading, taking the emphasis of his later work and imposing it upon earlier arguments.

Nonetheless, the positions taken in *In Defense of Lost Causes* do establish the basis for Žižek's embrace of communism, which occurs not through an abstract, ideological commitment for communism but, rather, via political identification with the 'part with no part' of capitalism. Here, initially advocating for the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' at the expense of liberal democratic values, Žižek suggests:

The standard liberal counter-argument to those who warn about the "invisible hand" of the market that controls our destinies is: if the price of being freed from the *invisible* hand of the market is to be controlled by the *visible* hand of the new rulers, are we ready to pay for it? The answer should be: *yes* – if this visible hand is visible to and controlled by the "part with no part" (2008: 419, original emphasis).

In this sense, Boucher and Sharpe's editorial contention that;

Žižek's program of egalitarian communism is to be actualized by a group dictatorship that will represent the interests of the radically disenfranchised worldwide and will implement policies aiming at material equality in the context of ecological sustainability (2010: 3).

Is partially correct – Žižek is writing in support of material equality and ecological sustainability through the interests of the world's radically disenfranchised – yet entirely misses the point. Žižek has no program, let alone policies. Instead, his political intervention into communism is located in an entirely disruptive evocation of the globally disenfranchised and their association with capitalism. Žižek has, for instance, suggested

that one of the two sides of democracy – the other being the regulated process of electoral politics – is the direct imposition of those who are outside of the polis (2008: 417; 2009b: 45). Vitally, however, he does not imply any support for an alternative democratic programme; Žižek’s consideration of the “part with no part” lies only in terms of its (extimate) exclusion from capitalism.

Developing his consideration of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Žižek goes on to implicate the “part with no part” as the antagonism with the most radical potential to disrupt capitalism. Identifying four antagonisms which currently threaten global capitalism – ecological degradation; the inadequacy of private property to response to digital technology and the intellectual commons; new scientific-technological developments; new global divisions or forms of ‘apartheid’ – Žižek suggests that it is only the fourth antagonism which signals the universality of capitalism; that which must be excluded in order for capital to continue to function (2008: 420-429)..

It is on the basis of these antagonisms that Žižek’s reference to the communist hypothesis begins in earnest in both *How to Begin from the Beginning* (Žižek, 2009b) and *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* (Žižek, 2009a). Whilst in *In Defense of Lost Causes* Žižek ends his discussion of these antagonisms by suggesting that not only do the first three designate the domain of the commons and thus justify a reference to communism, but that it is the fourth antagonism – exclusion – which is the site of universality within capitalism. The vital step from universality to communism, however, is only taken in *How to Begin from the Beginning*, where Žižek prefaces his previous argument in regards to the status of the four antagonisms by stating that; “is, however, only the fourth antagonism, the reference to the excluded, that justifies the term communism” (2009b: 44).

It is only, however, with the publication of *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* that Žižek begins to specifically refer to communism as a hypothesis. Here Žižek introduces the hypothesis by way of reference to Badiou, who stated:

The communist hypothesis remains the right hypothesis and I see no other ... if this hypothesis is to be abandoned, then it is not worth doing anything in the field of collective action. Without the perspective of communism, without this kind of idea, nothing in the historical and political future is of such a kind of interest to the philosopher. Each individual can pursue their private business and we won’t mention it again ... (Badiou, 2008: 115).

Žižek (2009b) repeats Badiou’s argument adding that one should not read the hypothesis as a ‘regulative idea’ of the kind that might lead to an ethical socialism with an *a priori*

norm. Rather the communist hypothesis must be referenced to actual contradictions within capitalism. As Žižek states:

To treat communism as an eternal Idea implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal than the antagonism to which communism reacts will always be here. From which it is only one step to a deconstructive reading of communism as a dream of presence, of abolishing all alienating representation; a dream which thrives on its own impossibility (Žižek, 2009a: 88).

As such, Žižek comes to suggest that the communist hypothesis comes into being specifically on the basis of one antagonism; the “gap which separates the excluded from the included” (ibid.:97). Without this antagonism, Žižek suggests, the remainder of the set loses all subversive potential, becoming challenges and opportunities for the development of new markets; ecological degradation and the Green dollar being the emblematic example. Instead, Žižek insists upon a rehabilitation of the Marxist problematic of locating a grouping which, precisely because it lacks a place in the social order, stands for the universal Truth of that order itself. As such, attempts to exclude the part with no part (as exemplified by the excessive slums populations of the world) whether through ideological mystification, the laws of private property or indeed physical walls themselves, constitutes the struggle for universality within global capitalism. On account of the ontological location of this disparate and desperate grouping, the universal exception holds the place of a palpable tension that is capable of productively disrupting capitalism, not so much through the kind of revolutionary action that some Marxists might have envisioned but, rather, through the fatal disruption of ideological coherence within Western capital itself. Through this disruption the prospect for reimagining new forms of being, modes of production and political action becomes a distinct possibility.

It is the necessity of maintaining barriers against the excluded within capitalism that justifies a specific reference to communism rather than to democracy or to fascism. Communism is not an innocent or arbitrary signifier but, rather – even if this conclusion has to be explicated from Žižek’s position rather than directly read – signals a commitment to egalitarianism and equality not possible under capitalism. The question, Žižek asks, is if the demand of the part with no part cannot be answered within capitalism, is democracy “an appropriate name for this egalitarian explosion[?]” (ibid.: 99). Ultimately, Žižek’s evocation of the communist hypothesis is a rejection of the liberal democratic horizon, suggesting that it is only a return to communism that would do justice to this demand. Yet, this form of communism is not guaranteed by history, rationalism, or the big Other to be

*the* form of political being but, rather, signals the point of impossibility within capitalism.

In this sense, Žižek's exposition of the communist hypothesis appears to be another iteration of the Lacanian dialectic in a Marxist context; an attempt to reinvent the communist mode of subversion within capitalism in a manner which cannot be captured by capital. Despite the mass of publications and positions Žižek has produced since his initial breakthrough in 1989, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, the only elements that have altered since the opening chapter of that text (in which Žižek extends on Lacan's assertion that it was Marx who invented Lacanian symptom by detecting a fundamental imbalance within capitalism whereby a specific instance that appears heterogeneous to operation of capital – selling one's labour – is universal to the operation of capital (1989: 21-22)) is the addition of the communist signifier and the specific reference to exclusion.

Yet, this addition produces notable theoretical complications, as is witnessed by both the recent publication of *Living in End Times* (2010) and Badiou's elaboration of his initial reading of the hypothesis. In the former, not only did Žižek not elaborate on communism as a hypothesis, returning instead to further analysis of the antagonisms which haunt late capitalism, but he also sought to distance himself from Badiou's 'Idea of communism', a proposition that has extended beyond its initial formulation. Badiou's Idea can be contrasted with Žižek's hypothesis in the sense that the former has sought to develop the ideological basis upon which it stands; ideology being in firm contrast to Žižek's evocation of the Real antagonisms of capital. Such a distinction signals the difficulty of Žižek's reference to communism. If Žižek's attempts to evoke the Real tension evident in the antagonisms of capitalism, the identification of this tension in a positive signifier threatens to undermine the disruptive effect of the Real within capital. The difficulties between representation and the Real are at the heart of Badiou's work around communism; it is to this Idea that I now turn.

## **The Idea of Communism**

Badiou first introduces communism as a hypothesis towards the end of his polemic text, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (2008). Here he is less evasive as to the value of communism and the potential content of the communist hypothesis than Žižek, claiming that there have been two previous sequences of the hypothesis: the first from the French revolution to the Paris commune (its establishment) and the second – its first attempt at realisation –



running from the Russian revolution to the end of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. For Badiou, our task today is to determine the yet to be constructed content of the third sequence. There is, however, an ideological background to these sequences. Communism, Badiou suggests, would eliminate both inequality of wealth and the division of labour. Moreover, distinctions between manual and intellectual labour will disappear, along with differences between town and country. Naturally, the state itself will become unnecessary (ibid.: 115-117). Thus, although Badiou does not specifically identify the shape of the programme that will come to embody this hypothesis, his initial emphasis had been upon the ideological imaginary associated with the signifier 'communism' and its relationship to equality and economy rather than the epistemological and ontological of the concerns that have pre-occupied the Left after the discursive turn.

Nonetheless, in Badiou's follow-up exposition of the hypothesis in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010) the hypothesis of the title is now distinguished as an Idea and a number of ontological concerns are reintroduced. In the chapter *The Idea of Communism*, Badiou seeks to develop what it means to hold to an Idea, attributing greater value to the form of the Idea than to content of communism (ibid.: 254). Whilst this development gives greater consideration to the difficulties of representation in a manner confluent with the ontological basis of Badiou's previous work, it also provides additional concerns in regard to political practice within capitalism.

For Badiou, an Idea is generated by what he terms a Truth procedure. A Truth procedure comes into being in relation to a subject (as opposed to an individual) who becomes a 'militant of this Truth' (ibid.: 234) in achieving subjectivation. An Idea is thus the operation of a Truth procedure embodied by a subject within a historical state. In these terms, an Idea is the interplay of between the singularity of a Truth procedure and a representation of history. Nonetheless, for Badiou an Idea remains ideological in the sense that it not only imagines the emergence of a political Truth within a historical situation but seeks to project that political Truth onto another historical situation (ibid.: 238). Thus whilst Badiou's second reading of the Idea of communism is not as openly ideological as his previous consideration of the '3rd sequence' of the communist hypothesis, it still relies upon an imaginary identification.

Badiou is open in regards to the ideological status of the Idea, simply stating that "something can be said to be 'ideological' when it has to do with an Idea" (ibid.: 240). Nonetheless, the implications of invoking an ideological dimension to the practicing of Truth are significant. Whilst Badiou's Idea does not suggest that, to paraphrase Ernesto

Laclau, 'communist society does exist' it does offer an imaginary horizon for subjectivised militants of communism to grasp in the anxiety provoking face of Truth. That is, if the Real element of a Truth procedure grasps the subject, Badiou's Idea of Communism implies that the militant subject of this Truth must be able to project this Truth onto an alternative imaginary, lest they be caught up in a reactionary appeal which lessens the anxiety of an encounter with the Real Truth.

Thus, for Badiou, the Idea of communism operates between the Truth held in the Real and the imaginary projection of this Truth onto an imaginary ideological Idea. As such, even if revolutionary politics is ultimately a victory for those with no names – the part with no part – Badiou still insists upon the need for the finitude of proper names in politics (ibid.: 249-252). That is, while a political Truth is by definition excluded from the 'state' the vehicle through which that Truth becomes an event is an idea based upon the nodal point of a proper name, whether that of an messianic individual or ideological movement. For Žižek, Badiou's insistence upon the necessity of ideology and thus ideological illusion is evidence of his reliance upon a transcendental illusion and subsequent hidden Kantianism based upon a mis-reading of Hegel. In this regard, Žižek argued:

One could also say that the Idea of communism schematizes the Real of the political Event, providing it with a narrative coating and thereby making it a part of our experience of historical reality – another indication of Badiou's hidden Kantianism (2010: 185).

Without wishing to enter into discussion over Badiou and Žižek's respective understandings of Kant and Hegel, pertinently Žižek argues that political practice organised around the tension of the Real yet mediated by the narrative of the Idea and ideological solidification around a proper name, as in Badiou's form of communism, risks a short-circuit between the Real and ideology, thus intervening against the anxiety of the Real and the possibility of a rupture within capitalism. Thus, as much as the differences between Badiou's and Žižek's respective communisms can be identified as ahistorically ontological, the primary distinction relates to political strategy in regards to the ontic parameters of ontology within capitalism and subsequent opportunities for radical subversion. Where Badiou contends that change can only come from a collective subject embodying the excluded truth of capitalism in the name of the Idea of communism, Žižek insists that there is no outside to capitalism within which an alternative node of ideology could flourish in a truly disruptive sense. Whilst Badiou's subject of communism is not

specifically outside of capital in the sense that it emerges from the internal failure of capital, any positive ideological movement stemming from this position becomes inherently linked with the structure of capital. In Badiouian terms, the ideological grip of capital is such that ideas only come to make sense in terms of the 'facts' of capitalism. Certainly, Badiou's Idea offers the prospect of a powerful political movement, entailing a collective subjectivation around the antagonistic points of capitalism. Yet, severe doubts must be held over the efficiency of such a movement. A movement of the part with no part, the universal exception, if successfully evoked in the manner Badiou's suggests, holds the possibility of providing substantive ideological disruption and anxiety provoked by an encounter with the Real.

Are we at a point, however, where capital would simply collapse into revolutionary fervour, or, are the material and ideological powers of capital such that a revolutionary movement would inevitably be crushed? For Žižek, not only is capital largely able to integrate its own symptoms into opportunities for profit, and create a self-fulfilling matrix of understanding such that ideas only 'work' according to the logic of capital but, beyond all theoretical considerations, the material might of the officers of capital is beyond direct confrontation. Capitalism cannot be defeated from the outside. Instead, it must be induced to implode upon its own antagonisms. The question is how to achieve this internal combustion without evoking a transcendental faith in history or a pathetic political quietism. In response to this problematic, in this paper I propose that, today, communism is best read through a utopian lens that resists the production of imaginary coherence and instead insists upon the drive of impossibility inherent in global capital. This lens, which involves a psychoanalytic re-reading of utopia as well as communism, seeks to move Žižek's use of communism beyond the identification of the antagonisms of capitalism without establishing an alternative ideological fantasy. In order to properly consider this possibility, I will first turn to the concept of utopia itself, one that may appear entirely divorced from the psychoanalytic thrust developed thus far.

### **Utopia: Demand the Impossible!**

At its most basic utopia can be conceived as an impulse or desire for something different from the existing. In this sense, utopianism has been referenced to the prospect of radical political change in the name of a perfect future society. The utopian urge, however, does

not necessarily take the form of a desire for a radically different form of being. Today, the elementary utopian demand is embodied in the conservative hope that, ultimately, society does exist; that life could be managed in such a manner that the fullness of presence is possible within existing structures. We see this utopianism played out in discussion around environmental issues in which the threat of overwhelming ecological degradation is placated by the prospect of technological innovation, responsive markets and 'political will' (see Sachs, 2008).

The utopian demand can be regarded as the desire for *jouissance*. Indexing utopia to *jouissance* – Lacan's seminal concept of an excessive enjoyment that exists for the subject after their constitutive castration in language – means that at first glance, utopia – despite its radical pretensions – is a counter-intuitive position for any form of politics taking its orientation from a Lacanian-inspired psychoanalysis that has emphasised themes of lack, finitude and excess.

Conversely, an alternate modality of utopia can be constituted around the very impossibility of its realisation, rather than the *jouissance* imagined in the ideological utopia of the ideal. This mode retains the demand for a better world but finds the drive for change in the limitation of imagination rather than its location in a specific ideal. If, for example, a dominant mode of contemporary environmentalism displays the tragic utopianism of the ideal harmony with nature, an alternative mode could momentarily exist in a discombobulation of ideology stemming from a collective and traumatic realisation that existing devices cannot prevent ecological disaster. This realisation – an evocation of the Real – has the potential to disrupt the consistency of capitalism in a way that new modes of understanding can flourish.

Utopia, considered in both these modes, is thus not to be divorced from the everyday but, rather, is at the heart of the human experience. It is a response to the operation that Ruth Levitas (2007: 290), following Ernst Bloch (1986), identifies as the fundamental utopian expression: that utopia is at its core an expression of the desire for a better way of being, a principle that Bloch designated as 'hope'; a desire for something that is missing. In this sense utopian thought does not require the wholesale imagination of new worlds, although this construction is an articulation of the utopian desire. Instead, these constructions are an expression of a larger demand for *jouissance* the wholeness before language.

Indexing utopia to *jouissance* suggests that, rather than taking the form of elaborate visions, a utopian urge appears in the everyday performance of social life. In this sense,

utopia cannot be juxtaposed against ideology – utopia seeking to change society, ideology to maintain it – as Karl Mannheim contended (Mannheim cited in Levitas, 2007: 289). Instead, this sense of utopia is entirely ideological; utopia is an expression of *jouissance* that lies at the heart of ideology. The everyday performance of utopia, therefore, is the performance of *jouissance* in a variety of discursive forms; the elementary demand of the utopian/ideological position is that, contra-Laclau, 'society does exist'.

It is the critique of this mantra that forms the basis of psychoanalytic criticism of utopianism. Suggesting that attempts to attain the fullness of *jouissance* or utopia must violently exclude a dystopian element that cannot be named, for many – and not limited to psychoanalytic theorists – utopian politics can be deemed idealistically unrealistic at best, dangerous at worst (c.f. Gray, 2008). Barack Obama's presidential campaign and subsequent administration is one example of the inevitable failure (and danger) of the utopian imagination. Obama's campaign imagery of 'change' and 'hope' brought with it a wholesale imagination of a different kind of society. Yet, at the moment of his election, from his inauguration speech to the widespread restoration of Bill Clinton's political advisors, the desire and *jouissance* behind the Obama utopia collapsed. This collapse, despite being embodied by specific events, was not dependent upon these events but, rather, necessary; the utopian ideal collapses as soon as imagination is put into action. Equally, since this collapse a more potent movement has emerged, based largely around the ultra-conservative Tea-Party, which seeks to restore the utopia of 'America' largely by way of associating Obama with an otherness which is threatening this imaginary.

The alternative mode of utopia, based around the impossibility of its instantiation is more akin to the impulse of the Lacanian dialectic. Rather than seeking to extend or fulfil a utopian imagination, this modality locates the utopian moment at the very limits of ideology. Such a utopian moment does not lie in the content of ideology but, rather, the impulse for change that occurs when the symptoms of an order become overly traumatic such that they cannot be contained within ideology. The utopia of the Real – as opposed to the ideal – occurs when, unable to contain the trauma caused by exposure to the Real, new modes of being emerge.

As Žižek, discussing the lack of alternatives to capitalism, states in the documentary *Žižek!*;

We should reinvent utopia, but in what sense? There are two false meanings of utopia; one is this old notion of imaging an ideal society which we know will

never be realised. The other is the capitalist utopia in the sense of new perverse desires that you are not only allowed but even solicited to realise. The true utopia is when the situation is so without issue, without a way to resolve it within the coordinates of the possible that out of the pure urge of survival you have to invent a new space. Utopia is not kind of a free imagination, utopia is a matter of inner-most urgency, you are forced to imagine as the only way out, and this is the utopia we need today (Taylor, 2007).

A utopian drive lies in the impossibility of imagining an alternative future to capitalism despite the inability to resolve its great horrors: such a demand is embodied in Jameson's oft-repeated remark that capital limits our imagination such that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than a change in the mode of production (see Jameson, 2003). Rather than attempting to suture the contradictions of capital, a utopian demand occurs when the subjects of capitalism are compelled to imagine a new mode of being in order to avoid the trauma of the breakdown of the ideological frameworks which have contained the horrors of capital.

The distinction between the two modes of utopia can be found in Thomas More's original conception, using Greek terms to bring together 'no place' and 'good place'. This suggests both a tragic and comedic face to utopia. Utopia can be tragic – a place we will never reach – or comedic; utopia lies in the constituent impossibility of its realisation. This latter form does not cling to an alternative conception of society but, rather, relies upon the build-up of energy around the very limits to our imagination. Imagination, of course, is not limited to the fancy of the individual. Rather, imagination is always a social creation; the limitations of our imagination are always the limitations of the ideological terrain.

A profound difficulty presents itself at this point: finding a way to imagine the prospect of an alternative future without foreclosing the possibility of it coming into being. What we require is not a utopian urge to fill out the failure of capitalism, either through capitalism itself or its cultural supplements but, rather, a desire to move beyond capitalism on the basis of the traumatic impossibility of capital. This desire constitutes not only an approach to the Real but the *jouissance* of impossibility itself. That is, the impossibility of imagining utopia does not bring an end to *jouissance* but, instead, persists in the form of *jouissance*. This form of utopia does not dismiss *jouissance* as an illusion but, instead, suggests that *jouissance* drives every attempt to imagine utopia. The vital difference between the forms of utopia is that the positive mode attempts to locate this utopian place, whereas the impossible utopia plays upon the urge to go beyond the existing. The key distinction here is between the fantasy of full *jouissance* provided by utopia-as-content,

and the subversion of alternative political imaginaries through utopia-as-form.

Whilst this form of utopianism leads itself to accusations of negativity and political quietism, positive forms are easily subverted. In relation to his reservations around the extension of imagination, Jameson argues that the designation of specific points of protest is contrary to the effectiveness of utopianism. It is for this reason that Jameson has previously suggested that utopia is at its most effective when it cannot be imagined:

Its function lies not in helping us to imagine a better future but, rather, in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future – our imprisonment in a non-utopian present without historicity of futurity – so as to reveal the ideological closure of the system in which we are somehow trapped and confined (2004: 46).

When the specific contradictions become apparent, the tendency is to focus political demands upon these points. At this point the utopian imagination becomes limited and what might have been a revolutionary demand gives way to practical political programmes (Jameson, 2004: 45). If the utopian moment occurs when the limits of ideology cannot be sutured, the identification of this moment with a particular demand risks a positivisation of the Real and a subsequent reactionary appeal to *jouissance* and a wholeness of being. That is, if the trauma of the Real opens up a wound within ideology, this wound can equally and effectively be sutured by a renewed ideological movement which displaces the cause of trauma. A salient example of this process in these times is the Green movement. Although Green ideology at times suggests energy for widespread change that might be considered utopian, it has become too easy to divert this enthusiasm into smaller scale demands that only serve to supplement the interests of capital and escalate ecological collapse.

Yet, if the Žižekian sense of utopianism – interpreted here through the communist hypothesis – takes its form from the expression of actually occurring antagonisms with capitalism, how does it avoid becoming particularised in singular demands? Whilst acknowledging that capital is able to include and pacify most of its symptoms, Žižek designates the 'part-with-no-part' as the specific contradiction which holds a vital, universal, status and thus cannot be subject to direct political demands. That is, whilst the utopian demand inherent in this necessary exclusion can be subverted in various ideological measures, such as charitable aid or the displacement of the antagonism to an exterior cause, the universality of surplus labour cannot be integrated within capitalism and for this reason remains the impossible point of a utopian demand.

Nonetheless, as Jameson might suggest, indexing communism in relation to utopia is to mediate against the utopian demand by providing an object for the imagination, an imagination that will inevitably become caught up in the facts and consequences of capital. This is ultimately a question of the representation of impossibility and the signification of the Real. Jameson and Badiou, as presented here, represent two sides of this debate. Where Badiou attempts to animate an idea with an overwhelming ideological component, Jameson resists any temptation to suture the limitation of our political imagination. Žižek's brief evocation of the communist hypothesis, however, suggests a third alternative. Here the reference to communism does not seek to develop a new imagination but, instead, insists upon thrusting open the trauma in ideology. This occurs, however, by identifying this trauma with both a specific antagonism – surplus labour – and with communism. The later is read not through the positivity of ideology but rather, as an opportunity to insist upon the impossibility of capital and direct the interpretation of its collapse.

### **Communism and Utopia**

Thinking communism in terms of utopia produces two alternative positions. Firstly, there is the fantasmatic utopia of communism without antagonism, a position Žižek has subject to sustained critique, regarding it as the ultimate Marxist fantasy of capitalism without antagonism (see Žižek, 1989: 49-53). This is the tragedy inherent in utopia as the image of the good place; an imaginary ideal that must fail and in doing so attributes this failure to an exterior cause. By contrast, the communist hypothesis lies in the utopian demand that the contradictions of capitalism are such that it cannot continue indefinitely. Specifically, the utopia of the communist hypothesis lies in capitalism's very failure to account for its own exclusions in the walls it is developing against the excess of humanity that builds around the globe: the universality of capital exists in this battle.

Badiou's Idea of communism has much in common with both readings of utopia. Read through the Jamesonian lens of utopianism suggested here, the utopian moment in Badiou's work occurs when the subject is grasped by a Truth such that become a militant evangelist for this Truth, forcing the Idea into being in the face of the facts of the situation. Nonetheless, the 'Road to Damascus' moment of Badiou's subject of Truth includes not only this moment but, also, the ideological path which provides the moment of Truth with political substance. Although the emphasis lies upon the truth of a situation, such that it



embodies the impossibility of capitalism, the mobilisation of this truth requires the subject commits to an ideology. The Badiouian procedure thus enlists two utopian moments for its political power; one of the impossibility of the 'no place', the other of the 'good place' of the 3rd sequence of the Idea of communism.

Yet, Badiou's insistence upon the stabilising presence of proper names means we must wonder how this Idea could come into place without a reactionary *jouissance* and the fantasy of the utopian ideal. Indeed, Žižek contends that Badiou's notion of 'sequences' of communism signals the difficulty in his conception of communism. Such an image of communism postulates the presence of an empty, universal frame which is altered under differing concrete circumstances. Instead of this abstract universality, Žižek's communism lies in the concrete universality of the failure of global capital (2010: 20).

Nonetheless, by contrast to Žižek's conception, Badiou's reading of the role of communism is clear in his notion of the Idea. Communism becomes both the interpretative procedure identifying Truth within facts and the ideology of a new world order; vitally, communism acts as a point of identification for the newly subjectivised individual. Žižek's communism remains more ambivalent. If his previous political positions have identified the tension and political power of those who are the 'part with no part', then we must consider how the addition of the communist signifier alters his politics. Through the reference to an impossible sense of utopia I have suggested that the traction provided by the utopian demand comes from identification with the impossibility of capitalism. This identification owes itself to Žižek's Lacanian reading of Marxism, rather than any historical reading of communist discourse.

Nonetheless, the difference between Badiou and Žižek on this point is subtle and much less marked than the contrast with Jameson. Where the latter insists upon the limitations of imagination as the place of utopia, both Žižek and Badiou seek to overtly politicise the moment of failure. The vital difference, however, is that where Badiou argues that an ideological platform is required for the subjects of Truth, Žižek seeks to politicise a potential rupture within capitalism by insisting upon its communist potential. This potential lies in the very impossibility of capitalism and is thus a utopian demand. Yet, even if Žižek does not himself postulate a consequential communist ideology, it is inevitable that the very spectre of communism would evoke images of the shape of the communist future. In this sense, we must insist on the vital distinction between Žižek's focus upon Truth and the Real and Badiou's collective subject. This distinction relates not so much to an abstraction of theory but, rather, an ontological reading of the conditions of possibility for subversion

within capitalism. Where Badiou conceives of hope for a collective movement against capitalism, Žižek insists that capitalism can only be brought to its knees through an awareness of its own limits.

Thus, a Žižekian interpretation of communism is able to postulate this signifier without a corresponding ideological manifesto because it is not an abstract or ideal formulation but, rather, a reaction to existing conditions. That is, by identifying the exclusion of surplus labour as essential to the operation of capitalism – the point of concrete universality within capitalism – because it speaks to the system as a totality. In regards to Jameson's concerns around the possible subversion of utopian energy caused by the naming of this point, the communist hypothesis does not suggest a 'filling' out of the utopian space but, rather, signifies that point which cannot be filled out. In this sense, through the impossibility of including surplus labour, the communist hypothesis does open up a new horizon for the Left but not one that will please many of Žižek's critics – it does not produce a new point of imaginary identification but, instead, opens up new space for these identifications to be formed.

As such, Žižek's communism is not an empty treatise on political strategy but, instead, is dedicated to moving beyond capitalism. This commitment forms the basis of the 'communist' hypothesis rather than any reference to democracy as the driver of the future. Žižek justifies the use of communism as the named signifier of the transition from capitalism to the future by reference to the surplus labour within capitalism itself. This identifies not only a belief that those extimately excluded within capitalism who do not enjoy the benefits of this system but, also, that this is a problem in itself. is, by utilising communism and surplus labour as the primary reference point to the end of capitalism, Žižek is signaling more than just a strategic intent to move beyond capitalism: he is implicitly suggesting a political commitment to egalitarian justice to which there is no requirement for further justification.

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, in keeping with much of the scholarship on the communist hypothesis, Badiou's explicitly titled work is a collection of essays and conference presentations, many of which have little or no relation with the title.

<sup>2</sup> The notable exceptions being Glyn Daly and Adrian Johnston, who produced generally positive contributions.

<sup>3</sup> These antagonisms have remained a focal point in Žižek's most recent point, although the scarcity of material resources is included with the contradictions of intellectual property. Usefully, Daly (2010) suggests that the drive of finance capital should be included in this list.

<sup>4</sup> See Žižek's (2004) previous debate with Boucher (2004).

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