

FRANCK FISCHBACH

MARX AND COMMUNISM

Krisis, 2011, Issue 1
www.krisis.eu

Yes, gentlemen, the Commune [...] wanted to make individual property a truth by transforming the means of production, land, and capital, now chiefly the means of enslaving and exploiting labour, into mere instruments of free and associated labour. But this is communism, 'impossible' communism!
– Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*

The question of knowing whether Marx was communist can, at first sight, appear either as a useless question, inasmuch as the answer is obvious, or as a provocation pure and simple. And yet, it is the only question which deserves to be asked with respect to the relation of Marx to communism. It would effectively be useless to ask what communism is according to Marx for the very simple reason that he never really answered the question: nowhere does he say precisely what communism is; nowhere does he describe what a communist society would or could be, at least not beyond the generalities which consisted in saying that it would be 'the reign of freedom', that it would be a society in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all (Marx and Engels 2008: 66), or 'an association of free men, working with the means of production held in common, and expending their many different forms of labour-power in full self-awareness as one single social labour force' (Marx

1976: 171). We must therefore adopt his approach from the outset: the question worth posing is not what is communism according to Marx, but what is being communist according to Marx. The question is to know what it meant for Marx to think, to act and to live with reference to something like communism. It is therefore not a matter of the essence of communism, but of the meaning of the relation of someone to communism, that someone being, in this case, Marx himself.

But, at the same time, we are not posing this question out of all context. Indeed, we know that the term and the concept of 'communism' have recently been the object of a reappropriation, that they have been put back on the market: Alain Badiou, in particular, aims to confer a new legitimacy upon the usage of the term and upon the concept that it designates, and to make it possible once more to lay claim to communism, beyond the collapse of the regimes which claimed to embody it, not least since this collapse does not, for all that, spell the liquidation of what the philosopher calls 'the communist hypothesis', insofar as this hypothesis designates the ever open horizon of human emancipation (Badiou, Žižek et al 2010). It is in this context that the question of knowing what communism was to Marx himself can be restated. I note that one of the characteristics of the theoretical context which is immediately ours is not only to put the concept of communism back into circulation, but also, and at the same time, to discredit the concept of socialism. This was already clear with Toni Negri's book, significantly entitled *Goodbye Mister Socialism*, and the tendency has been further reinforced by certain recent writings of Slavoj Žižek. The latter notes, for example, that 'socialism is no longer to be conceived as the infamous "lower phase" of communism, it is its true competitor, the greatest threat to it' (2009: 96); or again, 'communism is to be opposed to socialism, which, in place of the egalitarian collective, offers an organic community' – Žižek citing as proof of this last point that 'Nazism was national socialism, not national communism' (Ibid., 95). Obviously, it is tempting to retort to Žižek that national communism well and truly did exist and that it was known as Stalinism, or that contemporary China offers a charming example of national communism, albeit coupled with a remarkable capitalist development. But the introduction of an opposition between communism and socialism serves Žižek and others to explain that none of all this has anything to do with communism: the

USSR and the defunct ‘People’s Democracies’ of the Eastern bloc belong to the sad and tragic history of socialism, not to that of communism; the same holds for contemporary China: not only does it attest to the fact that ‘really existing socialism’ is perfectly compatible with capitalism, but it also indicates the future path of capitalism itself, namely, that in order to save itself ‘capitalism must reinvent socialism.’ For my part, I am tempted to see in this largely artificial raising of a strict opposition between ‘socialism’ and ‘communism’ a way of rehabilitating the latter and of sparing oneself a serious reflection on the relation maintained between the concept or the Idea of communism and what has been done in its name, including the worst, all throughout the Twentieth Century. One ought in any case to recall that in Marx himself we find nothing which resembles such an opposition between socialism and communism: like a number of his contemporaries, Marx uses one or the other of these terms indifferently and treats them as synonyms. To which should be added that we also do not find in Marx either this fascination for the ‘common’ nor this defiance regarding the ‘social’ which seem to be those of our contemporaries: manifestly and strangely, for a number of the latter, the ‘common’, and thus also ‘communism’, are highly legitimate philosophical concepts; on the other hand, everything concerning ‘society’, the ‘social’ and ‘socialism’ seems to be associated with a compromise with sordid reality. To the extent that philosophy is at ease and ‘at home’ with the concepts of the ‘common’ and ‘communism’, to that same extent is it tempted to consider that the ‘social’ and ‘society’ concern what ‘functions’, and, as such, the sciences of the same name, that is, the social sciences. I tend to consider the fashion for the current discourse on the ‘common’ and ‘communism’ as the sign of a withdrawal [*repli*] of philosophy onto a terrain which it invests all the more willingly in that it sees in it a sort of refuge where it can attempt to get back to pure forms of itself, ones which could be considered outdated.

Socialism and Communism

But let us return to our question of the relation of Marx to communism. Two things are immediately striking. Firstly, the fact that, apart from cer-

tain extracts from very well known and relatively brief but widely read and commented upon texts, the number of texts which Marx effectively dedicated to communism is in reality slight, and occurrences of the very term ‘communism’ are ultimately few in number given the immense corpus of texts which constitute Marx’s oeuvre. In other words, he who is considered the theoretician of communism par excellence, as the very founder of modern communism, he whom the millions of militant communists and socialists claimed to follow, but he, too, whom the so-called ‘communist’ party-states – under which lived more than half of humanity throughout the course of the twentieth century – claimed to follow, this man ultimately wrote very little about communism as such, and altogether – quantitatively speaking – did not say a great deal about it. Secondly, the fact that, very often, what we think we know about the relation of Marx to communism does not, in reality, refer to Marx himself: thus the idea according to which, after the revolution, ‘socialism’ would constitute a transition phase which would prepare and precede the instauration of a ‘communist’ society.¹ This thesis was certainly used by states known as ‘socialist’ or ‘communist’ in order to legitimise themselves and especially in order to legitimise the fact that, not only were they maintaining the form of the state, but that they were even increasing, to an enormous degree, the hold of bureaucracy and the police over society.

But it is undeniable that this thesis of a transition to communism via the intermediary of the phase of state socialism is not to be found in Marx: it is the very form of this ‘reasoning’ in terms of ‘transition’ and ‘phases’ which seems to have been foreign to Marx, such that when one brings back into circulation this discourse on phases and transition – as does Žižek when he imagines that a form of state and authoritarian socialism along Chinese lines could well constitute a next stage of capitalism (Badiou, Žižek et al 2010 : 148-149) – in reality, it is not to Marx directly that one refers, but to a conception which has, indeed, played a central role in Marxism. What do we read from Marx’s pen in the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’? This: ‘Between capitalist and communist society lies the period of the revolutionary transformation of the one into the other. There corresponds to this also a political transition period in which the state can be nothing but *the revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat*.’

(1978: 538) What is immediately noticeable is that no mention here is made of any sort of ‘socialism’ understood as a phase of transition between capitalism and communism, and that the period of revolutionary transformation is in no way identified by Marx with a period during which the proletariat would seize the existing state apparatus and undertake its transformation into a socialist state. It is undoubtedly a question of ‘transition’ in Marx’s text, but one must be attentive to the fact that this transition is described as ‘political’ and that it is assimilated to a ‘revolutionary transformation’ of one society into another. The immense difference between what Marx effectively says in this passage and the manner in which it has since been interpreted is, on the one hand, that Marx is speaking here of a *moment* and not of a *process* (understood as a process of transition with phases) and, on the other hand, that he is speaking of an essentially *negative* and even *destructive* moment, something entirely different from a *positive* process of creation and *construction*.

The context, from which this famous passage is too often separated, throws light on what is at stake for Marx: he is attacking the illusions fed by social-democracy under the Lassallean influence on the subject of the state, the main illusion consisting in the ‘imagination that with state loans one can build a new society’ (Ibid., 536), which – let us note – condemns in advance all state construction of socialism or all construction of state socialism. Marx is demanding here a complete change of perspective and is calling on workers to abandon the point of view according to which the state appears as a reality external to society: ‘Freedom,’ he writes, ‘consists in converting the state from an organ superimposed upon society into one completely subordinate to it. (Ibid., 537)’ It is, however, precisely this transformation of the state into an organ subordinate to society which is at stake in the ‘political moment’ in which consists the famous ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’: this dictatorship – of which Marx makes clear that it is revolutionary, and thus that it itself constitutes part of the revolutionary transformation of society – does not mean that the workers or the proletariat would take possession of the state and its apparatus such as they are, consequently maintaining the state apparatus in its exteriority to society, with the only difference being that from now on they would make it work to their own advantage.² The dictatorship in question is a moment internal to the revolutionary transformation of society. More

precisely, it is the political moment of this social-revolutionary transformation, that political moment consisting in the *destruction* of the state as organ external to society and its reduction to the function of an organ at once internal to society and entirely serving the collective organisation of social production, that is to say, serving to ‘revolutionize the present conditions of production’.

Neither a construction of a socialist state nor a phase of construction of socialism by the state, but, on the contrary, and even inversely, a destruction and negation of the state as an apparatus external to society in the very act of its subordination to society, this act³ itself being nothing other than the properly political moment of the revolutionary transformation of society, that is, the liquidation of the present conditions of production, starting with the condition represented by the current form of ownership. At a distance of more than thirty years, Marx thus maintains an analysis to be found as early as his ‘Critical Marginal Notes on the Article “The King of Prussia and Social Reform”’ (1844), namely, that a social revolution possesses a political moment,⁴ and that this political moment, far from being affirmative, creative and constructive, is, on the contrary, essentially negative and destructive with regards to the present social conditions of production. That is why ‘building socialism’ or ‘constructing communism’ are formulas which have no meaning in terms of Marx’s texts.

The Paris Commune

In addition, for Marx, communism understood as the political moment of the social-revolutionary transformation already possesses a historical illustration in the occurrence of the Paris Commune. Accordingly, at the moment he is writing the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ in 1875 Marx already has in mind the lessons to be drawn from the experience of the Commune. As an ‘entirely novel historical formation’ and, in this instance, an entirely novel *political* formation, the Commune, according to Marx, consisted essentially in ‘breaking modern state power’ whilst ‘restoring to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the state

parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society,' and all this by abolishing first of all the army and the state functionarism, society's 'two greatest sources of expenditure' and oppression. Such is the essentially political moment of the destruction of the state as an institution that feeds parasitically upon society, blocks, impedes and stifles its movement, and it is for this reason that Marx hails in the Commune 'the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour' (Marx 1986: 334). It appears that the politically negative and destructive moment is at the same time and indissociably a socially creative and liberatory moment: It is in fact that the communal constitution, the active destruction of the modern state, that conceives of itself as a tool, an instrument serving the revolutionary transformation of society, and certainly not as the positive instauration of a new political reality, be it socialist or communist. It is the political moment of the destruction of a state which was impeding the free development of society: it is the destruction of an obstacle, and not the construction of a new order.

The Commune, as the political form assumed by the power of the working class negating and destroying the old state power, does not signify the constitution of a new political power: it is merely an instrument which, as Marx says, 'serve[s] as a lever for uprooting the economical foundation upon which rests the existence of classes' (Ibid., 334). Thus, according to Marx, the task [*œuvre*] accomplished by the working class is not primarily political in nature: it is a *social* task [*une œuvre sociale*] which, naturally, passes through a political moment and political means, but whose purpose is always social. This social purpose is nothing other than 'the expropriation of the expropriators,'⁵ that is, the abolition of private property which, be it said in passing, does not mean the abolition of all property, nor the instauration of collective ownership, but which consists in making 'individual property a truth' by placing under the control of society the conditions (notably the means of production) which are presently, on the contrary, destroying individual property because they are conditions of, at one and the same time, the expropriation of the majority and the exploitation of labour. And yet, this social task [*œuvre sociale*] was precisely that of the Commune, and it is this task that Marx refers to here by its proper name: '[T]his is communism, "impossible" communism,' that

communism which suddenly appears on the contrary to be "possible" communism'.

So it is not surprising that this was the place Marx chose to repeat what he had been saying since the *German Ideology*, namely, that communism is neither a utopia, nor an ideal: 'They [the working class] have no ready-made utopias to introduce *par décret du peuple*,' '[t]hey have no ideals to realize,' they have only 'to set free elements of the new society with which old collapsing bourgeois society itself is pregnant' (Ibid., 335). Marx could not spell out any more clearly that communism is not a social and political state foreseeable under the form of a utopia or an ideal, which would imply understanding political action as the action of construction and creation of an order conforming to this ideal; it is far rather a social process of destruction of the obstacles which the present society imposes upon the blossoming within itself of a 'higher form' (Ibid.), a process which cannot be accomplished without passing through a political moment of destruction of the principal obstacle (namely, the state as an entity separated from society) and of invention of new forms of organization which are inseparably social and political.

The real movement which abolishes the present state of things

This can only lead us back to *The German Ideology* and to the idea of communism as the '*real* movement which abolishes the present state of things' which we find there.⁶ There we have an anti-Utopian model which is clearly that of the *immanence* of communism to the *present* historical and social situation. But if certain tendencies of Marx's thought head in this direction,⁷ this does not necessarily mean that there already exist in the present capitalist society objective elements of communism whose immanent development can carry this society beyond itself. Unquestionably, this conception can refer to elements to be found in Marx's thought, and it has played an important role in Marxism up to the present day, as witness the positions adopted by Hardt and Negri.⁸ We know that Rancière rejects this 'temporal scenario which makes communism the consequence of a process immanent to capitalism' (2010: 231 ff), but he

does so whilst believing himself in opposition to Marx. We can show, however, that in Marx the model of communism as ‘*real* movement’ is a model which only really makes sense once put in relation with the theme of revolutionary *praxis*: without this, indeed, communism would become identical to the set of contradictions which undermine *from inside* the present state of things and which are themselves already in the process of abolishing it. But in this case why would Marx speak of a ‘real [*wirklich*] movement’? In what sense, indeed, would the set of contradictions internal to the present state of things be, not only a ‘movement’, but a *real* movement, or rather an *effective* movement, that is – if we suppose that Marx is using *wirklich* here in a sense which owes something to Hegel – a movement which is, not only presently at work and producing actual effects, but also and especially which can and even must be considered as *rational*, as the bearer of a rationality which it puts to work and effectuates?⁹ It seems to me that the automatic unfolding of immanent contradictions in the present state of things cannot be qualified by Marx as a ‘*real* movement’ in this particular sense of the term, which is a *strong* sense, signalled in the text itself by the fact that Marx underlines it. The expression ‘*real* movement’, it seems, only makes sense here in reference to a conscious, voluntary, organized practice – which makes it possible to consider it as ‘*real*’ in the sense of ‘*rational*’. In *Capital* Marx certainly wrote that ‘centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour reach a point at which they become incompatible with their capitalist integument,’ immediately adding: ‘The integument is burst asunder’ (Marx 1976: 929). But – precisely – if this ‘integument is burst asunder,’ it is because it does not burst by itself.

According to this model, we understand that communism is already there, incarnated and borne by the political and social practice of those who strive immediately to undermine the existing state of things and to completely reorganize it on a totally different basis. Communism would thus be present in the very organization of such a practice as collective, conscious and voluntary. The *Critique of the Gotha Programme* will say of the workers that ‘they are working to revolutionize the present conditions of production’: communism is entirely there, in this very work itself and nowhere else, in this actual work which is at once (negatively) a political task of undermining the existing order and (positively) the discov-

ery (in theory), as much as the actualization (in practice), of more wholesome [*accomplies*] forms of life which are growing in the margins of present society, but which the latter constantly opposes, diverts and oppresses. Consequently, these more wholesome communist or socialist forms of life can only be tested and put into practice *against* the present society and in conscious *opposition* to it.

In this sense, I think we can say that communism, according to Marx, is indeed a *power* (in the sense of potential) of the present society, but a power which cannot by itself become a real and genuinely active *tendency*: without an effort willingly and consciously directed *against* the present state of things, communism as the power borne by this state of things cannot become an effective tendency, that is, offensive and capable of really confronting the obstacles that this very state of things raises against it. That is why there is no passage nor transition, and even less an automatic transition from capitalism to communism: communism is firstly the construction and accumulation of anti-capitalist conditions at the very heart of capitalism – which cannot take place if there exist no men and women who think, act and work as communists. There are certainly, as Rancière says,¹⁰ ‘communists without communism’ (in the sense of the absence of reference to a communism which is already present in an objective and immanent way within capitalism), but there is surely no communism without communists. In this sense, it seems to me that Marx did not think that communism could be the realization of capitalism, or its truth, in the sense of the actualization of a power which already inhabits it, even if only negatively by undermining it, or of an actualization which would come after it, signifying at once its terminus, its end and its completion: communism is neither the realization nor the completion of capitalism, but its *negation*, its other, and this negation is real only by being a negation put into practice consciously and willingly at the very heart of capitalism *by communists*, that is, by women and men who here and now put into practice communist forms of life characterized by association, communal use of goods and ideas, absolute equality, contestation of real and symbolic borders, and resistance to the processes of privatization of goods and existences. The great problem for us, today, is that the bearers and architects of such a negation can no longer be designated with the assurance which was, apparently at least, that of Marx. Though let’s

be clear: I obviously do not mean that today there are no longer any identifiable proletarians or workers; on the contrary, the proletarianization of entire sectors of the population is a process that the current phase of capitalism has accelerated to an extent unimaginable even fifteen years ago. But that is not where the question nor the problem lies, simply because the objective fact of proletarianization alone does not suffice, and never has sufficed, to generate ‘communists’. The question is to know *who* and *where* are those who, amongst today’s proletariat and the workers (material or immaterial), are likely to be communists, to act, to think and to live as communists, in the various meanings of that term which we have attempted to outline here: we shall have an answer to this question only when they show themselves as such.

Franck Fischbach is professor of philosophy at the University Sophia Antipolis in Nice. His main interest is in the German philosophical tradition and in social philosophy. He has translated works by Hegel, Schelling, Marx, and Honneth, and recently published *Marx. Relire Le Capital* (Paris: PUF 2009), *Sans objet. Capitalisme, subjectivité, aliénation* (Paris: Vrin 2009), and *Manifeste pour une philosophie sociale* (Paris: La Découverte 2009).

This article originally appeared in French in *Actuel Marx*, 48 (2010), © Actuel Marx/Les Presses Universitaires de France.

Translated by Daniel Hartley

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¹ It is Lenin who, in *The State and Revolution* (1917), attributes to Marx the merit of having established a ‘clear scientific difference between socialism and communism’, considered as two successive ‘phases’ (the ‘inferior’ phase followed by the ‘superior’ phase) of the passage to ‘complete communism’ [*communisme intégral*]. Here, Lenin converts the essentially negative moment of the destruction of the state and of the subordination of the state to society, into a positive process of edification of a ‘state of the Soviets of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies’ exercising control over society.

² A hypothesis explicitly excluded by Marx: the Commune demonstrated that ‘the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes.’ This quotation from *The Civil War in France* is taken up again by Marx and Engels in their ‘Preface’ to the 1872 re-edition of the *Communist Manifesto* (*op. cit.*, 86).

³ And it is incontestably a violent act, such that here, in Marx himself (and therefore before Lenin), a link between violence and politics is established, in which Étienne Balibar is quite right to perceive a considerable problem (see Balibar 2010).

⁴ ‘Every revolution dissolves the *old society* and to that extent it is *social*. Every revolution overthrows the *old power* and to that extent it is political.’ (Marx 1978a: 132)

⁵ *Ibid.*, 335. The exact same phrase is found again in the penultimate chapter of *Capital*, vol. 1 (*op. cit.*, 929).

⁶ ‘Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement [*die wirkliche Bewegung*] which abolishes the present state of things.’ (Marx and Engels 1978c: 162)

⁷ Notably in the *Grundrisse* (a reference which we know plays a decisive role in the thought of Toni Negri, see below). There Marx explains that large capitalist industry enables a development of the ‘[f]orces of production and social relations’ which appear to capital as ‘mere means [...] for it to produce on its limited foundation’; ‘[i]n fact, however, they are the material conditions to blow this foundation sky-high.’ (Marx 1973: 706)

⁸ See Negri 2010: 46-54. See also Hardt and Negri 2001, especially pp. 43-44: ‘[...] we insist on asserting that the construction of Empire is a step forward in order to do away with any nostalgia for the power structures that preceded it [...]; the potential for liberation is increased in the new situation [...]: [Empire] increases the potential for liberation.’ What enables Hardt and Negri to write this is essentially their understanding of the transformations that have occurred in production due to the growing hegemony of immaterial labour insofar as it permits a similarly increasing production of the common: ‘the production of economic goods tends also to be the production of social relationships and ultimately of society itself.’ Hardt and Negri 2004: 350. It is thus that the transition to immaterial labour gives production the allure of a ‘production of the multitude [which] launches the common in an expanding, virtuous spiral’ (*ibid.*) – a spiral which is conceived as immanent to the present phase of capitalism and which it is appropriate to embrace in order to be able to adopt and amplify its movement.

⁹ We know that, according to Hegel, actuality (*die Wirklichkeit*, category of the logic of essence) is distinguished from simple ‘reality’ (*die Realität*, category of the logic of being) which is represented as something other than and external to thought and to reason: on the contrary, only that can be considered *actual* which manifests externally the rationality which inhabits it and which drives it internally. That’s why Hegel writes the following: ‘As distinct from mere appearance, actuality, being initially the unity of inward and outward, is so far from confronting reason as something other than it, that it is, on the contrary, what is rational through and through; and what is not rational must, for that very reason, be considered not to be actual.’ (Hegel 1991: 214)

¹⁰ Rancière 2010: 231 ff. The expression ‘without communism’ designates for Rancière the refusal of all reference to a communism conceived either as ‘the accomplishment of a historical necessity’, or as ‘the heroic reversal of this necessity’ (244).