

**Alain Badiou's "Politics of Emancipation"**  
**A Communism Locked Within the**  
**Confines of the Bourgeois World**

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**D**emarcations  
A Journal of Communist Theory and Polemic

[www.demarcations-journal.org](http://www.demarcations-journal.org)

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## INTRODUCTION

Alain Badiou is attracting a great deal of attention from some circles of progressives and radicals, within academia and beyond. As a philosopher and a social theorist, he is considered to be “politically clear-sighted and courageously polemical,” putting “notions of truth and universality back on the agenda.”<sup>1</sup>

Badiou’s political philosophy flows from his summation of past revolutions and attempts at radical change, centrally the Cultural Revolution in China. Inspired by the massive rebellion of May ’68 in his native France and remaining faithful to its spirit, Alain Badiou continues to shun elections and parliaments. At a moment of severely lowered sights about the possibility and desirability of radical change, Badiou comes across as someone rescuing “communism”—by “unburdening” it of the past experiences and theory of revolutions, socialist states, and parties, and instead fashioning a “politics of emancipation” singled out as radical, and radically new.

In this polemic, we examine Alain Badiou’s political project. We ask, throughout, “Will this lead to emancipation?” Our answer is that it will not and cannot. What follows is analysis and argumentation as to why.

### **The Historical Moment**

Alain Badiou’s perspectives and stand are part of a larger ideological and political trajectory of our times—a response to a historical moment.

Communism, and the communist project, is at a crossroads.

With the restoration of capitalism in China in 1976, the first wave of socialist revolutions and societies that began with the short-lived Paris Commune in 1871 and the Russian revolution in 1917 has come to an end. The end of the first stage of socialist revolutions, which has entrained what might be described as 30 years of counter-revolution, along with extensive changes in the world, is throwing up monumental questions and tasks. It is posing world-historic challenges for the communist movement, and others who consider themselves broadly supportive of this project of human emancipation.

What are the correct and incorrect lessons to be drawn from the rich experience of this first wave of socialist revolutions? What is the framework for a new stage of communism, for going forward with this project for the emancipation of humanity? Is Marxism—communism—still valid as a science? In the most fundamental sense, the question comes down to this: Can you make revolution in today’s world, a genuinely emancipating communist revolution—or is that no longer possible, or even desirable?

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1. Terry Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 253.

As described in *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, there are three main and essential responses to this moment<sup>2</sup>:

First, there are those who do not have a critical approach to the experience and theory of the first wave of socialist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both the advances and the problems and shortcomings, but who instead are circling the wagons and not moving forward. As the RCP, USA's Manifesto describes, among those with this line, "it is common to find the phenomena of insistence upon 'class truth'<sup>3</sup> and related reification of the proletariat, and generally an approach to communist theory and principles as some kind of dogma, akin to religious catechism—in essence: 'We know all we need to know, we have all the fundamentals that are required, it's just a matter of carrying out the handed-down wisdom.'"

Second, there are those who reject real scientific analysis of the contradictions of the socialist transition and distance themselves from the unprecedented breakthroughs in human emancipation represented by the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. They look for inspiration and orientation even further back into the past—to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the proclaimed democratic and egalitarian ideals and social models of the bourgeois epoch, to philosophers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant and to political theorists like Thomas Jefferson. In some cases, they discard the very term communism; in other cases, they affix the label "communism" to a political project that situates itself firmly within the bounds of bourgeois-democratic principles.

Third, there is what Bob Avakian has been doing. He is not only the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, which has its sights set on the revolutionary seizure of power and the radical transformation of society, but is also a visionary theorist. Since the defeat of the Chinese Revolution in 1976, he has been applying himself to the challenges of making revolution in today's world, acting on the understanding that communist revolution is the only way forward, out of the madness and horror that is social existence on this planet. Bob Avakian has been "learning from the rich historical experience since the time of Marx, upholding the fundamental objectives and principles of communism, which have been shown to be fundamentally correct, criticizing and discarding aspects that have been shown to be incorrect, or no longer applicable, and establishing communism even more fully and firmly on a scientific foundation."<sup>4</sup> He has defended from reactionary assault and upheld the extraordinary breakthroughs of the Russian

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2. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2008), pp. 30-33. Hereafter cited as *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*. Online at [revcom.us](http://revcom.us)

3. "Class truth" refers to the view, which has had considerable currency in the international communist movement, that truth—especially in the realm of the social sciences—is not objective but rather specific and relative to different classes, i.e., the bourgeoisie has its truth and the proletariat has its truth. But what is true is objectively true: it either corresponds to or does not correspond to reality in its motion and development. "Class truth" overlaps with the erroneous idea that people of proletarian background have a special purchase on the truth by virtue of their social position. But truth is truth no matter who articulates it; and getting at the truth, for proletarians as well as people of other social and class origins, requires the grasp and application of a scientific approach to society and the world.

4. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*, p. 24.

Revolution (1917-56) and the Chinese Revolution (1949-76). For Avakian, while there is principally continuity with the first wave of socialist revolutions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose high-water mark was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China, there is also rupture with wrong conceptions and methodology.

On the basis of this approach, Bob Avakian has forged a new synthesis comprehending path-breaking developments in the realms of philosophy and method, internationalism, the character of the socialist transition to communism, and in the strategic approach to revolution. As a qualitative development in the science of communism, this synthesis “embodies a continuation of Mao’s ruptures with Stalin but also in some aspects a rupture beyond the ways in which Mao himself was influenced, even though secondarily, by what had become the dominant mode of thinking in the communist movement under the leadership of Stalin.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Badiou’s Political Project**

We are no longer in a situation in which there is a clear distinction between two opposed political orientations—as was the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Not everyone agreed on what the exact nature of these opposed politics were, but everyone agreed that there was an opposition between a classical democratic bourgeois politics and another, revolutionary, option... Today, there is no agreement concerning the existence of a fundamental opposition of this sort, and as a result the link between philosophy and politics has become more complex and more obscure.<sup>6</sup> — Alain Badiou, 2007

The political project of Alain Badiou is a concentrated expression of the second pole identified here: the retreat to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. As opposed to the dialectical materialist new synthesis brought forward by Bob Avakian, Badiou’s approach represents an idealist and undialectical response to the objective phenomenon of the End of a Stage. Badiou is seeking to conjure up a “new synthesis” not by building on, while at the same time advancing further from, communism as a science, as it has developed from Marx through Lenin to Mao, but by going back before Marx to come up with a different “idea” of “communism.”

A pivot point of Alain Badiou’s political theory and project is his negative and unscientific summation of the first wave of socialist revolutions. This flies in the face of the reality of these revolutions, their overwhelmingly positive achievements. Yes, there are serious criticisms to be made. But on what foundation and with what method: going deeply and all-sidedly into this experience, in order to carry forward communist revolution in the new situation; or taking up the stand of bourgeois-democracy?

Alain Badiou holds that the emancipatory potential of the revolutions in the Soviet Union and China was constrained and ultimately destroyed by the party-state framework, the

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5. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*, p. 25.

6. Filippo Del Lucchese and Jason Smith, “We Need a Popular Discipline: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative,” Interview with Alain Badiou, Los Angeles, 2/07/07; *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Summer 2008, p. 646.

institutionalized leadership of the vanguard party, and the exercise of socialist state power. In his view, the party-state developed into a new form of “authoritarianism,” marked by “police coercion” and “internal bureaucratic inertia,” and the Cultural Revolution represents and, more than that, proves “the end of the party-state as the central production of revolutionary political activity.”

His conclusion is two-fold: “the politics of emancipation can no longer be subject to the paradigm of revolution nor remain prisoner to the party-form”; and “the age of revolutions” is over.

In framing this polemic, and in developing its arguments, we have drawn extensively from Bob Avakian’s new synthesis,<sup>7</sup> especially in the advances in conception of the socialist state as a radically different state in transition to communism, a more materialist and emancipatory conception of communist leadership, and a new strategic conception of making revolution in advanced imperialist countries.

As part of this new synthesis, Avakian has excavated unscientific notions of pure and classless and ever-perfectible democracy. This is highly relevant to the historical moment and to our polemic against Alain Badiou. In major critiques of liberal democratic theory, Avakian has examined the theories of Rousseau, Locke, and Jefferson, among others, including contemporary “antitotalitarian” theorists, like Hannah Arendt. At the same time, he has identified problems, secondary though at times quite pronounced, in the international communist movement since its origins, in not drawing a clear enough demarcation between communist and bourgeois-democratic principles.

## Core Theses

In this polemic, we engage with Alain Badiou’s political philosophy and theory. This involves three key and interrelated sets of issues and arguments.

*First*, Badiou’s politics of emancipation is a “radical politics of equality.” This finds its roots in Rousseau’s “egalitarian maxim” and the ideals of the French Revolution, as concentrated in the radical democratic program of Robespierre, Saint Just, and the Jacobins. This politics of egalitarianism stands in stark idealist contrast to what Marx referred to as the “4 Alls”: the

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7. Avakian’s critical explorations of bourgeois-democratic theory and his theorization of the need for communism to more fully and deeply rupture with democracy are addressed in pivotal works that include *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1981); the polemic “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That,” which appears as an appendix to Avakian’s *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism!* 2nd edition (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004), online at revcom.us; *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1985); *Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2008), (revcom.us); *The Basis, The Goals, and the Methods of Communist Revolution* (revcom.us); and *Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom* (revcom.us).

In writings on the international communist movement, including *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*, Bob Avakian has pointed to tendencies in the international communist movement to view the communist revolution as the true upholder of democracy, which was especially pronounced during the Stalin period with political orientations such as the “united front against fascism.”



abolition of all class distinctions, of all the production relations on which those class distinctions rest, of all the social relations that correspond to those production relations, and the revolutionizing of all the ideas that correspond to those social relations.

Badiou's radical politics of equality can neither overcome social inequality nor transcend what Marx called the narrow horizon of "bourgeois right" (commodity relations and inequalities within socialist society, which are left over from the old society, and their reflections in law, policy, and ideology).

*Second*, Badiou's "idea of communism" involves the repudiation of the dictatorship of the proletariat: the leading role of a vanguard party, the seizure of state power, and creation of a radically different type of state. He argues that the "party-state" framework—a construction to win power and secure victory against imperialism—is *saturated*. By "saturation" he means this framework can no longer give rise to fruitful solutions and outcomes or "decisive investigations of itself," but rather is a cause of bureaucratic authoritarianism and must be rejected. This is premised on a renunciation of the scientific concept of class, a formalistic view of democracy and the state, and an inability to recognize the material bases for why communist leadership is necessary, the indispensable role it can and must play, and the actual basis to overcome the contradiction between leadership and led.

While renowned for his sympathy for and engagement with the Cultural Revolution, in reality Alain Badiou concentrates a methodological tendency, identified in the Manifesto *Communism, the Beginning of a New Stage*:

Never taking up—or never engaging in any systematic way with—a scientific summation of the previous stage of the communist movement, and in particular Mao Tsetung's path-breaking analysis concerning the danger of and basis for capitalist restoration in socialist society. Thus, while...[people who take this approach] may uphold—or may in the past have upheld—the Cultural Revolution in China, they lack any real, or profound, understanding of why this Cultural Revolution was necessary and why and with what principles and objectives Mao initiated and led this Cultural Revolution.<sup>8</sup>

*Third*, Alain Badiou posits that truly radical change is a product of a thoroughly unexpected "event" of "pure chance." In the political realm, this ultimately reduces to passively waiting for a ruptural moment, the so-called "event." What he "prescribes" in waiting for the event is a politics "at a distance from the state," of "local struggles" and making "prescriptions of the state" (a concept we will explore in later sections of this polemic). It is in the end a recipe for reformism, an ineffectual hanging on at the margins, in opposition to the revolutionary overthrow of the existing order as the first, necessary leap in the process of bringing about an actual emancipation, ultimately of humanity as a whole, from all relations of exploitation and oppression, throughout the world.

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8. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*, p.32.

In constructing this polemic, we have sought to identify and argue with core and “best” arguments. But it must be recognized that Badiou’s theories come wrapped in layers of obfuscation that, while seeming to invest his enterprise with stature, mask its non- and anti-revolutionary character.

The purpose of this polemic is to reveal what Alain Badiou’s “politics of emancipation” actually represents. In doing so, we draw a sharp line of demarcation between this line and that of genuine emancipation: the science, revolutionary political movement, and goal of communism.

This polemic is aimed at those who are concerned about the future of humanity and who yearn for a radically different future—and who are seeking out theory adequate to the challenges of our times. It is aimed at enabling people to compare and contrast two opposed lines, and to understand why one, whatever the intentions of its author, remains captive to and would objectively lock us in to the world as it is; while the other offers a way forward and out of this madness.

# CHAPTER I: WHY ALAIN BADIOU IS A ROUSSEAUIST... AND WHY WE SHOULD NOT BE

## Introduction: Two Different Frameworks and Two Different Projects

Equality is a first principle, an axiom, in Alain Badiou's politics of emancipation. He has stated: "the philosophical embrace of emancipatory politics is to be carried out through the name of a radical politics of equality,"<sup>9</sup> the "egalitarian maxim [is] proper to every politics of emancipation."<sup>10</sup> He has enshrined equality as "the principle of principles."<sup>11</sup> In one of his observations, Badiou has noted:

Equality neither presumes closure, nor qualifies the terms it embraces, nor prescribes a territory for its exercise. Equality is immediately prescriptive, and the current resolve to denounce its utopian character is a good sign, a sign that the word has recovered its force of rupture.<sup>12</sup>

He has gone further still, and redefined communism as any popular struggle for equality, in any historical period, against state coercion. Here is Badiou in "The Communist Invariant":

*As a pure Idea of equality, the communist hypothesis has no doubt existed since the beginnings of the state. As soon as mass action opposes state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice, rudiments or fragments of the hypothesis start to appear.*<sup>13</sup> [emphasis ours]

Badiou places the demand and prescription for equality at the core of the communist project. The "problem" in human society is thus the condition of inequality; the "solution," the essence of communism as Badiou sees it, resides in the quest for equality as "immediate prescription" and "axiom of action."

But real communism is something far different, far more radical, and far loftier than equality. Describing the content and goal of communism and the socialist transition to communism—and distinguishing it from utopian and ultimately reformist socialism, Marx writes:

Socialism is the *declaration of the permanence of revolution*, the *class dictatorship* of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the *abolition of class distinctions generally*, the abolition of all the relations of production on

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9. Alain Badiou, *Conditions* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 173.

10. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 149.

11. Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 96.

12. Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 173.

13. Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," *New Left Review*, January-February 2008 (49), p. 35; <http://newleftreview.org/?getpdf=NLR28302&pdflang=en>.

which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.<sup>14</sup> [emphasis in original, underscoring ours]

Consider what is being gotten at, in this vision of overcoming “4 Alls” which Marx has formulated in this statement. The communist revolution involves the transformation of people and their thinking, and requires the most radical transformation of economic, political, and social relations and institutions. This revolution is aimed not at attenuating the extremes of polarization but overcoming all forms of exploitation and abolishing classes.

This is a “total revolution,” although not in a utopian sense. The material and social development of human society has created the basis for a revolution wholly unprecedented in human history: to create a world society of freely associating human beings who are consciously and voluntarily changing the world and changing themselves.

Has Alain Badiou captured the essence of communism with his “pure idea of equality”? No. Is this a creative development that possibly enriches the concept of communism? No again. What we will see is that this is not the “communist invariant”... but communism as a variant of bourgeois democracy.

### **Staying Within the Framework of Equality, or Moving Beyond the Narrow Horizon of Bourgeois Right?**

At first glance—and this is part of Alain Badiou’s appeal—he seems to be pulling the lens back in calling for “mass action oppos[ing] state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice,” a radical politics of equality that guides historic and righteous rebellions against the state. Shouldn’t emancipation be about achieving equality, and shouldn’t equality be “immediately prescriptive”?

Overcoming inequality plays a crucial role in relation to achieving the “4 Alls.” The deep-rooted inequalities of modern bourgeois society include those of class division, the division between mental and manual labor, the oppressive relations between men and women, as well as between dominant and minority nationalities, and the contradictions between town and country, among other key contradictions and divisions.

But equality is not a free-standing principle. As a concrete social relation or as a political-philosophical category, equality has a class character and is historically limited. It is generally linked with the economic relations and political institutions of the bourgeois epoch.

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14. Karl Marx, “The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850,” *Marx/Engels Selected Works* (hereafter cited as MESW), Vol 1. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), p. 282.

Further, as we will show, to pursue equality as an end itself will not lead to emancipation: *It will not strike at the relations of exploitation and the division of society into exploiting and exploited classes that is the taproot of inequality.*

In overcoming inequality, the communist revolution actually moves beyond equality (and democracy); indeed, in communist society, equality ceases to have meaning.

### ***Rousseau as a Thinker of the Bourgeois Revolution***

Alain Badiou's axiomatic approach to equality finds its roots in and marks a return to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the constructs of Jean Jacques Rousseau<sup>15</sup> and the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. Here is an excerpt from a "Meditation" on Rousseau in Badiou's influential work *Being and Event*:

Rousseau's acuity extends to his perception that the norm of general will is equality. This is a fundamental point. General will is a relationship of co-belonging of the people to itself. It is therefore only effective from all the people to all the people. Its forms of manifestation – laws—are: 'a relation ... between the entire object from one point of view and the entire object from another point of view, with no division of the whole.'

...Rousseau thinks the essential modern link between the existence of politics and the egalitarian norm. Yet it is not quite exact to speak of a norm. As an intrinsic qualification of general will, equality *is* politics, such that *a contrario*, any in-egalitarian statement, whatever it be, is anti-political. The most remarkable thing about the *Social Contract* is that it establishes an intimate connection between politics and equality by an articulated recourse to an eventual foundation and a procedure of the indiscernible.<sup>16</sup> [emphasis in original, underscoring ours]

Equality *qua* equality is the ultimate standard of Badiou's politics of emancipation, with the Rousseau-ian "egalitarian maxim" as central and defining. Let's examine this more closely and unpack some critical aspects of Badiou's return to Rousseau.

First, one has to ask, is it possible to speak, as Badiou does, of society, or the will of society, with "no division of the whole"? Can there be an undivided whole on a planet in which billions are exploited and dispossessed and in thrall to those relative few who control the means of production and enforce that control with arsenals of war and destruction?

The fact is that with the historical development of the capacity of human society to produce a social surplus (more than is needed for basic subsistence and the reproduction of society at a

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15. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was a political philosopher whose writings, such as *The Social Contract* and *A Discourse Upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, profoundly influenced the ideologues of the French, American, and other bourgeois revolutions. His thinking continues to exert influence on contemporary political thought.

16. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 347.

level of basic subsistence) and with the associated separation of mental from manual labor and emergence of patriarchy and private property, human society has been divided into antagonistic classes.

This is not to say there is no cohesiveness to society. There is, and it is grounded in the character and regulating mechanisms of the dominant mode of production and in the position occupied and role played by different social groups in the process of social production. But this social whole is riven by division and antagonism: between exploiters and exploited, and dominators and dominated. This whole could not “stay whole,” as it were, without social institutions and relations, and values and ideas, along with the “force of habit,” that act as a kind of “social glue.” Decisively, this whole could not “stay whole” absent the repressive force of state power concentrating and safeguarding the interests of the economically dominant class in society.

Rousseau’s view of equality was bound up with private property—indeed, Rousseau’s social contract was a guarantor of private property. Rousseau’s vision of an egalitarian society was premised on petty producers of commodities as self-sufficient and self-determining, each with commensurate means of production in a small city-state-type community whose basic cell was the *patriarchal* household. Moreover, Rousseau saw his local republic as an organic, *patriotic* community of equals. Patriotism and patriarchy—have we not seen enough of this? In class terms, Rousseau was a petit-bourgeois republican. Badiou knows all of this, but the “maxim of equality” trumps all.

The forms and content of equality in bourgeois society correspond to a certain mode of production: capitalism, based on commodity production and the interactions it engenders; private ownership; production for profit not need; and exploitation of wage-labor. Commodity production is governed by the exchange of equivalents, the measure of the labor time socially necessary to produce these commodities; that is, by an equal standard.

The capitalist mode of production generalizes commodity relations, central to which is the transformation of labor power itself into a commodity to be bought and sold. The laborer is free in a double sense: “freed” of ownership of means of production, and free to be exploited by this or that capitalist.

In *Capital*, Marx analyzes the forging of the modern proletariat and its historical basis in the *violent* separation of the producers from the means of production: mass uprooting and expulsion of peasants from the land, brutal enforcement of decrees forbidding vagabondage (the wandering poor). The condition of wage-slavery is one in which the producer is compelled to sell his or her labor power on the continuing basis of separation from the means of production.

The most fundamental exchange that takes place under capitalism is the exchange of labor power according to its value (the cost of maintaining and reproducing labor power) for wages and the use of this labor power, its exploitation, by capital in the sphere of production, yielding value in excess of wages (again, the costs of maintaining and reproducing this labor power). This is the “dirty little secret” of capitalist production. The production of surplus value based on the exploitation of wage labor is at the heart of capitalism. But this is disguised—it occurs through the exchange of equivalents and is masked by juridical (formal) equality.

Rousseau's "revolutionary idea" of equality and democracy is rooted in a profound transformation in production and class relations that takes place with the rise and development of capitalism—and this idea reflects, and is confined within, the framework of capitalist relations, which inevitably result in profound inequalities, and embody deep-seated exploitation and oppression.

Alain Badiou wants to bracket all of this. He wants to detach Rousseau's vision of equality from the social and class relations out of which it arose. He wants to detach this vision from the bourgeois relations to which it gave ideological impetus. On this basis, he extracts from Rousseau a political model of equality "in the absence of any economic connotations."<sup>17</sup> But such a model is unrealizable in the real world, and can exist only in the minds of thinkers, like Badiou, who are in thrall to notions of equality which are in reality the reflection of very definite "economic connotations"—or in fact economic relations—of exploitation.

### *Social Contract, or Bourgeois Social Construct?*

Rousseau's social contract posits a consensual view of the state: the modern (bourgeois) democratic state and civil society, originating in a willing accord, a social pact into which people enter in order to constitute a specific kind of "co-belonging."

The problem is that Rousseau's idyll of the "social contract" does not correspond to how states, even the most democratic state of the bourgeois epoch, historically evolved—or why states continue to exist. The state is not an institutional expression of a "social contract," embodying and guaranteeing the "general will." Rather, in its essence, the state—and in particular the state embodying and enforcing a system based on exploitation—is the machine for the suppression of one class by another and the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order. Nothing in the historical and continuing development of capitalist society or in the institutional evolution of the capitalist state and its mechanisms of legitimation has altered this core relation of class domination and suppression.

Rousseau was articulating the interests of the rising bourgeois class and was bringing forward an ideal vision of state and society that served this rising class and the consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. Rousseau's vision fired the imaginations of the more radical ideologues of the French revolution. Key to this was the idea of a free collectivity—a republican social organism made up of citizens whose freedom lay in the shared establishment of and obedience to a general will—concentrated in laws.

In the eyes of the ideologues of the bourgeois revolution, one of the main ways in which the old feudal order lacked legitimacy was the absence of popular sovereignty, no general will based on society—that is, emergent bourgeois society and its social-political representatives having a direct share in creating the laws and norms of society. This was taken up by the French revolutionaries as a rallying cry to smash the old and to create and legislate the new.

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17. Badiou, *Conditions*, p. 173.

Here is Badiou: “Rousseau’s acuity extends to his perception that the norm of general will is equality. *This is a fundamental point.*” Wrong. There is no abstract and transcendent “general will”<sup>18</sup> of equality reflecting the ‘will’ of slave-masters and slaves, landlords and peasants, capitalists and workers. What Rousseau was doing was to cast the particular class interests of the bourgeoisie, and the corresponding political-social structures that reflected and reinforced these interests, as the interests of society as a whole, embodying precisely what so seduces Badiou: the “norm of general will [to] equality.” Rousseau’s real “acuity,” whatever his subjective intent, was to give the gloss of formal equality to the very real cleavages in class society between oppressors and oppressed—cleavages that are rooted in exploitative and oppressive capitalist production and social relations.

Rousseau’s origin story of the bourgeois political order holds that “whichever way we look at it, we always return to the same conclusion: namely that the social pact established equality among the citizens in that they all pledge themselves under the same conditions and must all enjoy the same rights.”<sup>19</sup>

In reality, there is no “social contract” but rather a “social construct” that rationalizes bourgeois democracy and presents the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie as the consensual act of all. This—the fact that the social contract is what might be called a powerful “binding social fiction”—is “the most remarkable thing about the Social Contract”—and not, as Alain Badiou would have us believe, “that [it] establishes an intimate connection between politics and equality by an articulated recourse to an eventual foundation and a procedure of the indiscernible.”

“Rousseau’s acuity” was in asserting formal equality between exploiters and exploited (“its forms of manifestation [being] laws”), when in reality the class of exploiters exercises dictatorship over the class of exploited. The “general will” to equality as embodied in the social contract in reality is formal equality before the law in a bourgeois-democratic state.

However, equality before the law, in a society unequal and divided by social antagonisms, is decidedly not, as Badiou states in his reading of Rousseau, “a relation ... between the entire object from one point of view and the entire object from another point of view.” The social novelist Anatole France seems to know better than the political philosopher Alain Badiou: “The law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.”<sup>20</sup>

We are entering the realm of “bourgeois right.” Bourgeois right refers, in the more restricted sense of the term, to economic and social relations, as concentrated in law and politics and ideology, that uphold formal equality but which actually contain and reinforce inequality.

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18. As used by Rousseau, the “general will” denotes the will of society manifested in the Social Contract and its political institutions, but understood to be reflecting the “common good” and “welfare of the whole,” transcending individual preferences.

19. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapter 4, p. 76; quoted in Avakian, *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?*, p. 44.

20. Anatole France, *The Red Lily*, 1894, chapter 7 (Rockville, MD: Wildside Press, 2002).



Notions of bourgeois right define an entire epoch of human history borne of and dominated by commodity production and exchange, as well as the social relations and ideas that stem from it.

Some examples:

- The standard of “equality before the law” of bourgeois jurisprudence is a standard that serves the equal treatment of the capitalist property holders in a society governed by capitalist market relations. For the dispossessed, formal equality masks the condition of fundamental powerlessness.
- The equal “right to own” is premised on the right to exploit and the separation of the mass of producers from the means of production. This equal right to own facilitates the capitalist process of competitive accumulation and leads not to a world of small, co-equal commodity owners but to the absorption of the less profitable by the more profitable, that is, to the increasing concentration and centralization of capital, and to the increasing misery and toil of the mass of world humanity.
- The right of each and all to vote in a bourgeois democracy not only conceals and legitimizes control over state power by a bourgeois class, but is part of a matrix of ruling structures and mechanisms in the imperialist citadels that both rests on and serves to perpetuate the relations and privileges of empire and the division of the world into oppressor and oppressed nations.

#### *Ameliorating Inequality, or Overcoming It?*

Rousseau’s view of inequality stands in dialectical relation to his view of equality. That is, his critique of inequality was confined within the bounds of bourgeois society:

As for equality, this word must not be taken to imply that degrees of power and wealth should be absolutely the same for all, but rather that power shall stop short of violence and never be exercised except by virtue of authority and law, and, where wealth is concerned, that no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself; this in turn implies that *the more exalted persons need moderation in goods and influence and the humbler persons moderation in avarice and covetousness.*<sup>21</sup> [emphasis ours]

Hence, Rousseau was opposed to outright slavery but did not advocate the end of exploitation, oppression, and all social inequalities.

Rousseau considers these social differences as being entirely acceptable insofar as the equality standard is maintained: these citizens are equal before the law. While Badiou might not align himself with Rousseau’s formulation of the mutual responsibilities of the “humble” and “exalted” in the republican community, objectively he cannot actually escape its material and ideological bounds. Because that would require uprooting the relations of exploitation on which these inequalities rest.

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21. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapter 11, p. 96; quoted in Avakian, *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* p. 44.

The kind of egalitarian politics advanced by Alain Badiou can resonate among sections of democratic intellectuals and radicalized youth. We are living in a period of extreme and unprecedented polarization in the world, of vast and howling differences in wealth, security, and human welfare. There is a thirst for justice towards others and reciprocity on an equal footing in the times in which we live. But the grotesque inequalities that mark, and mar, the world are a product and manifestation of the division of society into classes, and of the exploitative production relations on which this rests. They are an expression, on a world scale, of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society, between socialized production and private appropriation by the capitalist class.

Polarization may, to some degree, in some circumstances, be reduced with redistribution and reform, but it is impossible to overcome the profound inequalities of the “late imperialist” economic and social order without resolving this fundamental contradiction of capitalism, its exploitative core. These profound inequalities cannot be overcome without making revolution to transform the economic base and superstructure of society.

Alain Badiou is outraged by the state of the world but recoils from the scale and scope of the struggle and transformations required to bring a radically new world into being: proletarian revolution whose first great step is the seizure of state power. His claim that “the age of revolutions is over”<sup>22</sup> and his rejection of the revolutionary seizure of power is reinforced by incorrect verdicts on the first wave of socialist revolution. He offers a political project of “pure equality” to be applied in a society divided into classes and in coexistence with bourgeois state power. He heralds this as a new politics of emancipation and declares that it embodies the interests of a “generic humanity” transcending class. But Badiou’s “generic” is in fact quite “particular.”

Alain Badiou is driven to a framework of understanding of the “problem” confronting humanity and its “solution” that corresponds to the class position and class outlook of a very definite segment of society, the radicalized petite bourgeoisie. He sees the problem of vast inequalities, but does not follow through to the taproots of exploitation in the economic base of society; he sees the solution as a “pure Idea of equality” in the political realm, not in achieving the “4 Alls.”

In his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx offers a profound and trenchant commentary on the outlook and illusions of the democratic intellectual:

...[O]ne must not form the narrow-minded notion that the petite bourgeoisie, on principle, wishes to enforce an egoistic class interest. Rather, it believes that the *special* conditions of its emancipation are the *general* conditions within the frame of which modern society can be saved and the class struggle avoided. Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes

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22. Quoted in Peter Hallward, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. 226.

them representatives of the petite bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the *political* and *literary representatives* of a class and the class they represent.

But the democrat, because he represents the petite bourgeoisie, that is, a transition class, in which the interests of the two classes are simultaneously mutually blunted, imagines himself elevated above class antagonism generally.<sup>23</sup> [emphasis in original]

Alain Badiou wants “equality” but shrinks from the complex process of making a revolution that not only overcomes social inequality but also achieves something far higher than equality.

### *Alain Badiou’s (Mis)Reading of the French Revolution*

Badiou states: “With the French Revolution, the communist hypothesis then inaugurates the epoch of political modernity.”<sup>24</sup>

This formulation is so lacking in historical materialist understanding as to almost defy credulity. It conflates the most radical of the bourgeois revolutions with communism. It conflates a revolution that enshrined bourgeois property relations and bourgeois right with one that aims to transcend all that. It conflates two different worlds: a communist world that puts an end to capitalism and to an entire human epoch marked by class division; and the bourgeois world of exploitation, wars of conquest, and misery—a world which, with the further development of capitalism into imperialism, refining its bourgeois-democratic structures, has become an even greater horror for humanity.

While Badiou’s assessment of the French revolution is consistent with his maxim of egalitarianism as the essence of emancipation, it has nothing in common with real communism.

This calls to mind Marx’s famous description of the communist revolution as involving the “two most radical ruptures,” with “traditional property relations” and with “traditional ideas.” The production and social relations instantiated by the French Revolution represent the past, not the future; the ideals of the French revolution represent the past, not the future. Yes, the French revolution was thoroughgoing. Yes, it proclaimed Year One as it radically swept away the feudal past—but this was about inscribing a new bourgeois property relation whose exploitative logic is ... to make zeroes of the billions on this planet.

The bourgeois epoch announces itself as the removal of all artifice and barrier to individual freedom. The most important right in bourgeois society is a right to property—the right of capital to individual ownership and control over means of production workable and usable only by

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23. Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, MESW, p. 126.

24. Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” p. 35.

social labor; it is the right of access to the labor power of others, the right of exploitation; it is the right to control this labor power once it is exchanged for wages. This kind of “freedom” did not exist in feudal society, where different property relations prevailed, where ownership had a hereditary stamp, where you did not have developed and integrated markets for “free labor,” or mobility to enter and exit different spheres of production and combine means of production with labor power. The French revolution was giving this process of implanting capitalist relations, as opposed to feudal relations, full scope with a new institutional state framework.

Alain Badiou transmutes the French revolution into the “inauguration of the communist hypothesis” and basks in the boldness of his reformulation of communism. Sadly, this does not even have the virtue of originality. There is an entire and pathetic revisionist “communist” tradition of turning communism into the fulfillment of the ideals of the bourgeois revolution; this is a “communism” that conciliates with national chauvinism and imperial privilege. It is an ideological and political stance that massages away the need for revolution and puts the bourgeoisie on notice: there will be no revolution under our watch. And even within the international communist movement, there have been secondary tendencies to blur the distinction between communist and democratic principles.

Alain Badiou’s “communist hypothesis” is itself part of the skein of “traditional ideas” with which the communist revolution must radically rupture.

The communist revolution aims for the abolition of the “4 Alls.” The French Revolution, even in its most radical manifestations, decidedly was not about that; and objectively it could not put an end to all exploitation and oppression. As Engels so insightfully stated:

The great men, who in France prepared men’s minds for the coming revolution, were themselves extreme revolutionists. They recognized no external authority of any kind whatever. Religion, natural science, society, political institutions—everything was subjected to the most unsparing criticism: everything must justify its existence before the judgment-seat of reason or give up existence... Every form of society and government then existing, every old traditional notion was flung into the lumber-room as irrational; the world had hitherto allowed itself to be led solely by prejudices; everything in the past deserved only pity and contempt. Now, for the first time, appeared the light of day, the kingdom of reason; henceforth superstition, injustice, privilege, oppression, were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal Right, equality based on Nature and the inalienable rights of man.

We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealized kingdom of the bourgeoisie; that this eternal Right found its realization in bourgeois justice; that this equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, the Contrat Social of Rousseau, came into being and only could come into being, as a democratic bourgeois republic. The

great thinkers of the eighteenth century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch.<sup>25</sup>

This is the correct historical perspective and scientific understanding of the French Revolution. It was a bourgeois revolution. But these are the ideals that Badiou seeks to resurrect and rebrand as communism: “With the French Revolution, *the communist hypothesis* then inaugurates the epoch of political modernity.” [emphasis ours]

Alain Badiou argues: “It is through Saint-Just and Robespierre that you enter into this singular truth unleashed by the French Revolution, and on the basis of which you form a knowledge...”<sup>26</sup> Let’s examine the program of the Jacobins, Robespierre, and Saint-Just to get at the content of what Badiou considers to be the emergent “communist hypothesis.”

Georges Lefebvre, a historian of the French Revolution with socialist leanings, correctly comments that Robespierre and other radical figures of the revolution:

regarded individual and hereditary property as an evil but declared it incurable...were hostile to ‘opulence’ and the ‘rich’, that is, to wealth that was believed to be excessive and conducive to idleness. *Robespierre, like Saint-Just, whose Republican Institutions were particularly explicit, followed Rousseau in considering that liberty and equality (both civil and political) disappeared for most citizens as social inequality increased.* Thus, the Republic owed it to itself, on the one hand, to limit fortunes and to increase the number of small landowners; and on the other, to provide everyone with the means of rising in society.... *The ideal remained a social democracy of small independent producers, peasants and artisans.*<sup>27</sup> [emphasis ours]

Lefebvre goes on to point out that this ideal cannot be realized. It is a point of analysis developed further and more scientifically by Bob Avakian:

At the heart of the matter was that Robespierre—and the Jacobins generally—tried to institute a society that would realize the bourgeois ideals of equality, freedom and the universal rights of man, avoiding the extremes of wealth and poverty, monopolized power and mass powerlessness. The historic irony lies not in the fact—as is often alleged by bourgeois democrats and bourgeois historians generally—that in the attempt to do this they resorted to dictatorial and violent means and then themselves became the victims of this; rather, it lies in the fact that *this bourgeois ideal actually corresponds most to the position of the petite bourgeoisie ...* and yet this class (or more accurately, these petit-bourgeois strata) are incapable of ruling society and reshaping it in their image. This is because the

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25. Friedrich Engels, “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific,” MESW, p 116; quoted in Avakian, *Democracy*: p. 46.

26. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 23.

27. Georges Lefebvre, *The French Revolution (from 1793 to 1799)*, Vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), pp. 110-11.

very property relations—and even more, the laws of commodity production and exchange—of which these strata are an expression, and the whole process of accumulation in which they are enmeshed once bourgeois production relations take hold, *inexorably lead to the polarization of society* into a small number of big bourgeois and a large mass of propertyless proletarians—with these petit-bourgeois strata caught in between. *One or the other of these two main forces must rule modern society.*<sup>28</sup> [emphasis ours]

With his “communist hypothesis,” Alain Badiou conflates the radical upsurges, social upheaval, and enthusiasm of the popular masses during the French Revolution with the communist revolution to overturn the bourgeois order and to create a new world. And herein lies the historical significance of the proletarian revolution. In previous epochs and in previous social revolutions, the oppressed have fought oppression. They have yearned for an end to their misery. But the revolutions in which the have-nots and oppressed were enlisted under banners and watchwords of something better and different, and which stirred their dreams, stood on a certain foundation of society in its motion and development. These revolutions were led by class forces representing new relations of production ... which were new exploitative relations of production.

The proletarian revolution is different. It is not a revolution to replace one set of exploitative relations with another but to end all exploitation. The development of human society has brought it to a threshold: the material and social basis exists to overcome scarcity and exploitation. Only this revolution, led by the scientific understanding of communism, can give full play to the hatred for oppression and the creative energies and enthusiasm of the “wretched of the earth”—and mobilize the masses to bring a radically and different world into being.

### ***Alain Badiou Subjectivizes Equality***

Badiou wants to press Rousseau’s radical egalitarianism into modern service. He wants equality as the paramount standard. But what does that mean in a society divided into classes? This constitutes the crux of the problem with formalistic notions of equality that take the egalitarian maxim as the essence of the politics of emancipation and that, not so surprisingly, seek inspiration in the egalitarian ideals of the bourgeois epoch—whether articulated by Kant, Jefferson, or Rousseau.

The solution to this problem in the Badiou-ist framework is this. He turns away from actual social transformation and turns equality into a regulative idea that serves as a principle of thought and action. But to what end is this action directed? Wherein lies its effectivity in a society founded on profound class divisions rooted in exploitative production relations?

In *Infinite Thought*, Alain Badiou specifies what he means and does not mean by equality:

It is very important to note that ‘equality’ does not refer to anything objective. It is not a question of an equality of status, of income, of function, and even less of the supposedly egalitarian dynamics of contracts or reforms. Equality is

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28. Avakian, *Democracy*: p. 35.

subjective. It is equality with respect to public consciousness for Saint-Just, or with respect to political mass movement for Mao Tsetung. Such equality is in no way a social programme. Moreover, it has nothing to do with the social. It is a political maxim, a prescription.<sup>29</sup>

This seemingly radical stance, aglow in its absolutist insistence, is worth walking through on its own terms and in its best light. Equality, Badiou is telling us, is a matter of “subjective” engagement, of the capacity of the collective. The egalitarian maxim guides and inspires action. What Badiou in his broader writings evokes is that this act affirms the co-belonging of its collective protagonists and sparks visions of something higher; and, further, in extraordinary moments of political novelty and creativity, subjective equality produces new standards and frames of reference.

There may be something appealing in this. The problem, though, is that it does not correspond to the reality of this society, of bourgeois society—its class relations and its underlying relations of exploitation, as well as its political relations and structures of oppression and domination, and what, therefore, needs to be radically transformed and ruptured with for emancipation. Badiou privileges the subjective *experience* of equality over a scientifically guided project of revolutionary transformation. His maxim has been acted on and the criteria for the politics of equality have been met ... but society, in its exploitative and oppressive structures and relations, has not been altered.

Listen to what Badiou says: issues of “status” and “function” are immaterial to equality as political prescription. Clearly, mass movements and upsurges, and revolutionary eruptions, engender new bonds and shared purpose. But how is it possible to overcome the inequality of women in society without transforming relations of “status” and “function,” and doing so at the most profound level, which means taking in “all” of the “4 Alls”?

Badiou insists that equality is not “social programme.” But to truly overcome inequality requires a “social programme” of radical transformation. It requires the overthrow of the bourgeois order, an overthrow which Badiou has foresworn (“the age of revolutions is over”), and the establishment of a new mode of production, socialism, based on social ownership, social planning, and bringing economic activity under conscious social direction; it requires a qualitatively different kind of state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the instrument to carry forward a thorough-going and deep-going revolution aimed at abolishing all exploitation and at uprooting all inequalities and oppressive relations and their reflections in the realm of ideas—and, with the achievement of these goals, throughout the world, the abolition of the state itself.

It is this revolution, a worldwide process of continuing revolution, that can uproot male supremacy, that can end the subjugation of minority nationalities, that can overcome the great divide between oppressor and oppressed nations in the world, and ultimately create a world community of humanity, no longer divided into antagonistic classes and separate national-states.

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29. Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 54.

Against the measure of proletarian revolution, Rousseau is puny. Even punier are the attempts by those like Badiou to embrace the outlook of the past and bedeck it in the costume of communism.

Badiou's characterization of Mao's orientation towards mass movements in the passage cited from *Infinite Thought* cannot go uncommented on. Badiou has morphed Mao into a radical populist, a Mao that simply trusts in the spontaneous wisdom of the masses. In fact, the masses, as Mao pointed out, divide into the advanced, intermediate, and backward at any given point—which is to say, there is no spontaneous “equality of understanding.” Moreover, Mao emphasized the need for leadership of mass movements, even those marked by intense solidarity, as was the case with the radical upsurges of the Cultural Revolution.

Yes, people have a capacity for truth (a criterion of equality for Badiou) but exactly in consequence of the divides and inequalities in society, this capacity does not translate into spontaneous gravitation towards or embrace of truth. This, once again, underscores the need for leadership—vanguard communist leadership, grounded in a scientific, dialectical materialist outlook and method—in order for the masses themselves to actually achieve the goal of radical emancipation, in the fullest sense.

### ***How Communism Goes Beyond Equality and Why it Must***

At best, Alain Badiou's approach to the politics of emancipation, one in which the “egalitarian maxim” is overarching, remains strictly within what Marx called the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right.” This yardstick of equality cannot constitute genuine emancipation—and left to itself and pursued as a goal unto itself will lead back to exploitation and inequality.

To further illustrate the limitations of Badiou's approach to equality, and why this does not represent genuine emancipation, let's take the far reaches of the egalitarian standard in the sphere of distribution. Let's take this standard in a society without exploitation and where the governing principle is “from each according to their ability to each according to their work.” The amount of work performed is the (egalitarian) metric of payment or the amount of goods corresponding to payment according to work.

But different individuals have different capabilities and different needs, so this formal equal right masks real inequalities. In fact, this principle “from each according to their ability to each according to their work” governs socialist society. On the one hand, this represents a qualitative advance over capitalist society; this standard cannot be applied when capital extracts surplus labor from a proletariat separated from the means of production and thereby dependent on this exploitative wage relation to live. On the other hand, this standard remains a defect of socialist society and is part of the material and ideological soil engendering new bourgeois forces under socialism.

This problem and defect was first identified by Marx, and defined as part of the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right” that had to be transcended in order to overcome classes, oppressive social divisions and social antagonisms. Marx from *Critique of The Gotha Programme*:



Here ... [in the principle ‘each according to his ability, to each according to his work’ followed in socialism – ed.] ...the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is exchange of equal values. ‘... [E]qual right here is still in principle—*bourgeois right*...’ This *equal* right is an unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences, because is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges. *It is, therefore a right of inequality, in its content, like every right*... [U]nequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one *definite* side only ... are regarded *only as workers*.... To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal...

In ... communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety...<sup>30</sup>

In communist society, it becomes possible to implement a different principle of distribution: “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.” The all-around abilities of individuals will be shaped and promoted by a society that values diversity but no longer attaches advantage to differences in individual capability nor suffocates human potential; a richness of need arising out of a society of mutual flourishing will be met as part of the very fabric of society itself. There is no “equality” or “inequality” bound up with this standard.

“From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” requires that social productive forces on a world scale have reached an advanced and sustainable level of development. “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” requires that a social consciousness and social morality is forged, and a scientific world outlook taken up, such that the individual in society deeply grasps his or her interconnectedness with society, and all those who make up society, and is motivated by mutual concern based on the striving for common social good.

Communism requires getting beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right as Mao used the term in the broader sense to describe the social differences (like the division between mental and manual labor) and economic relations (including commodity production and the divisions and separations it engenders) that carry over from bourgeois society into socialist society—along with their reflections in the political and ideological superstructure of society.<sup>31</sup>

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30. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Program,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Ed., ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), pp. 530-31.

31. Avakian has deepened the scientific understanding of the whole question of bourgeois right, and getting beyond its narrow horizon, including in his recent talk, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” available

If the restriction and overcoming of bourgeois right is not the perspective in the socialist transition to communism—if in place of that an egalitarian project and allied ideological discourse were to take hold—then the conditions in which some individuals obtain more than others, interacting with the corrosive ideological effects of “me-and-my-share,” would ultimately result in the re-emergence of polarization, private accumulation, and private property in the means of production, and antagonistic class division.

This understanding flows out of a scientific approach to achieving the “4 Alls” and the project of truly emancipating all of humanity.

With the achievement of the “4 Alls” and the abolition of classes, with the passage of society through revolution to a new era in which one section of society no longer dominates and represses another through the instrumentality of a state—with this, “equality” and “rights” and “duties” cease to have any meaning. The very “right to equality” exists, and can only exist, in relation to real inequalities and their material-social bases. The existence of these rights requires a state to enforce them. Communism means and requires moving beyond equality and the rights associated with and attached to it. It means the withering away of a state to enforce these rights. Human social organization will have advanced to a higher level, in which humanity is consciously and voluntarily changing itself and the world.

Socialism is a transition from capitalism to communism. It will involve both fighting to eliminate social inequalities at every step of the way and enforcing rights of equality in socialist society—while, at the same time, carrying forward the transformations necessary to transcend equality. Socialist society must be striving to move beyond equality and other manifestations of bourgeois right; and must, in any given stage of development of the socialist revolution, be actively transforming relations and ideas in this direction to the maximum degree possible.

Alain Badiou’s “egalitarian maxim proper to every politics of emancipation” does not offer a pathway of moving beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right—nor open the possibility of eliminating the bases for class society, commodity production, and exploitative and oppressive relations. It is stuck in bourgeois society.

### **End Note: Brief Observations on Badiou’s Method and Communism as a Kantian “Regulative Idea”**

Alain Badiou begins his essay “The Communist Invariant” with a discussion of communism as set forth in the *Communist Manifesto*:

What is the communist hypothesis? In its generic sense, given in its canonic Manifesto, ‘communist’ means, first, that the logic of class—the fundamental subordination of labor to a dominant class, the arrangement that has persisted since Antiquity—is not inevitable; it can be overcome. The communist hypothesis is that a different collective organization is practicable, one that will eliminate the

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in *Revolution and Communism: A Foundation and Strategic Orientation*. (revcom.us)

inequality of wealth and even the division of labor. The private appropriation of massive fortunes and their transmission by inheritance will disappear. The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society, will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganization based on a free association of producers will see it withering away.<sup>32</sup>

Which he immediately follows with:

‘Communism’ as such denotes only this very general set of intellectual representations. It is what Kant called *an Idea, with a regulatory function*, rather than a programme....As a pure Idea of equality, the communist hypothesis has no doubt existed since the beginnings of the state. As soon as mass action opposes state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice, rudiments or fragments of the hypothesis start to appear. Popular revolts—the slaves led by Spartacus, the peasants led by Müntzer—might be identified as practical examples of this ‘communist invariant.’ [emphasis ours]

We have already quoted part of this passage. But let’s look at the method and the outcome of this exposition. Badiou begins with an acknowledgement, and a certain characterization, of the Marxist concept of communism in relation to class, the social division of labor, accumulation of wealth, and private appropriation. The goal of genuine communism is then bracketed as a “very general set of intellectual representations.” Having established this “general set,” Badiou reconstitutes communism as a “pure idea of equality,” and turns it into a “hypothesis” which has found expression in movements “since the beginnings of the state.”

Badiou tells us that communism (the “communist hypothesis”) is something akin to a Kantian “Idea, with a regulatory function.” By this, Badiou means that communism should be understood as a guiding principle that does not necessarily correspond to or represent reality but rather serves as an organizing principle to regulate and guide thoughts and actions.<sup>33</sup>

The significance of these moves is this. In reconceiving communism as a Kantian regulative idea, Badiou is emptying communism of its essential character as a science, and in particular a scientific outlook, method, and approach to social transformation, and the revolutionary political movement founded on and guided by that science. He erases the specificity of communism in two senses: the historical and social conditions underlying its emergence, and the actual liberatory content of the communist revolution.

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32. Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” pp. 34-35.

33. A Kantian regulatory idea, in the words of a leading Kant scholar, Allen Wood, may “instruct us how to inquire and what assumptions to use as the basis of our inquiries, but they do not guarantee the truth of these assumptions or guarantee that the world in its real constitution corresponds to them” (Allen W. Wood, *Kant*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2004, p. 96). As Kant first constructed it, and as Badiou employs it, a regulative Idea (in this sense of a “guiding principle”) can also be the ultimate horizon towards which one ought to strive, though it may not be achievable—and is therefore an infinite task. As one of his sympathetic expositors, Peter Hallward, has described, for Badiou, “universal equality is not an objective state to be accomplished or approximated, but the guiding principle of a purely subjective mobilization.” Peter Hallward, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. 44.

Put another way, Badiou wants a communism without Marxism; indeed, he has explicitly stated that Marxism, among other essential components of the communist revolution, like the revolutionary vanguard party, “is no longer useful to us.” And so we get a communism of “egalitarian justice”—what we have discussed in this chapter.

Communism, or scientific socialism, arose in specific historical conditions associated with the capitalist mode of production and the emergence of a class, the modern proletariat, linked to advanced productive forces and a highly socialized process of production.

The motion and development of human society have brought humanity to a historic threshold. For the first time, the material-social basis exists to put an end to exploitation, to overcome scarcity and meet the basic needs of everyone on this planet, and to allow for the all-around development of society and the individuals who make it up. But the realization of this potential requires proletarian revolution. This revolution resolves the fundamental contradiction of the capitalist system: between the socialized way production is carried out and the fact that this process of production, and what it produces, is controlled and appropriated privately. The proletariat embodies the potential to bring the relations of production into line with the productive forces and to move society forward beyond its division into classes—and to achieve the “4 Alls.”

Let’s look at Badiou’s statement that “popular revolts—the slaves led by Spartacus, the peasants led by Muntzer—might be identified as practical examples of this ‘communist invariant.’” Revolutionary communists firmly uphold these righteous rebellions. But to cast them as communist uprisings—because they confronted the state and exploitative relations and were inspired by egalitarian values and slogans—misses fundamental issues of mode of production, class, and ideology. These heroic rebellions did not have the social basis, the scientific understanding, and the vision to get to a world beyond exploitation and oppression. This was not even possible in those times and conditions, owing to the stage of development of human society, rooted in the development of the productive forces.

Badiou has folded the concept of communism into the “general principle” of equality and folded the revolutionary political movement for communism into the general class struggle of mass rebellion throughout history. Lenin famously commented on this mode of thinking:

For the theory of the class struggle was created *not* by Marx, *but* by the bourgeoisie *before* Marx, and, generally speaking, it is *acceptable* to the bourgeoisie. Those who recognizes *only* the class struggle are not yet Marxists; they may be found to be still within the bounds of bourgeois thinking and bourgeois politics. To confine Marxism to the doctrine of class struggle means curtailing Marxism, distorting it, reducing it to something acceptable to the bourgeoisie. Only he is a Marxist who *extends* the recognition of the class struggle to the recognition of the *dictatorship of the proletariat*.<sup>34</sup> [emphasis in original]

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34. V.I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1973), p. 40.

The communist program flows from the reality of the world we live in and the world we could live in. This requires the continuous development and application of the science of communism, a thoroughly scientific method and approach, that seeks to know and transform reality to bring about a far better world, a classless society without exploitation, oppression, or social antagonism.

What the *Manifesto* of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA has called the “long night”—the ushering in of an epoch of human history in which human beings have been divided into masters and slaves, and in which the uprisings of those like Spartacus could not overcome such divisions and exploitation—this “long night” can finally be ended. And the establishment of the dictatorship of the proletariat represents the first giant step towards that.

## **CHAPTER II: A POST-MARXIST POLITICS IN SEARCH OF A SUBJECT, OR ALAIN BADIOU ABANDONS THE SCIENTIFIC CONCEPT OF CLASS**

Alain Badiou has set himself the task of affirming and elaborating a “politics of emancipation” that is both unmoored from class and severed from the “party-state” matrix of 20<sup>th</sup> century communist theory and practice.

To be clear, Badiou is not offering a sophisticated, new mapping of the class structure of advanced capitalist societies in order to identify new configurations of revolutionary possibility. He proceeds along a different axis. He rejects a Marxist mode of political thinking cast in terms of class and more specifically the concept of a historically evolved class whose objective conditions of social life, anchored to a prevailing mode of production, form it into a “revolutionary subject” in the passage from the bourgeois epoch to the communist epoch.

He tells us that the “age of revolution is over,” and that the role of the proletariat as a revolutionary class has been played out, or “saturated,” through the experience of communism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that framework there is no basis, there is no urgency, to actually come to terms with complex challenges of forging the revolutionary analysis and strategy required to seize power, without which it is not possible to even have a chance at bringing about real emancipation.

### **To Abandon Class Analysis Is to Abandon the Masses to the Bourgeoisie**

In his rethinking of politics and class, Badiou argues that “politics is only thinkable through itself.”<sup>35</sup> Badiou is rather explicit in the insistence that there is no longer a determinate articulation of politics and class. He disputes:

[T]he idea that politics *represents* objective groups that can be designated as classes... There may exist emancipatory politics or reactionary politics, but these cannot be rendered immediately transitive to a scientific, objective study of how class functions in society.<sup>36</sup> [emphasis in original]

This is another example of Badiou’s idealist decoupling of politics from economics (in the broad sense of production relations and class)—much in the same way that he brackets the class interests represented by Rousseau and other bourgeois political theorists.

One is immediately tempted to ask of Alain Badiou with his bold reformulation of politics only thinkable through itself: Is there a ruling class in modern capitalist society? Can one make a “scientific, objective study of how class functions in society” with regard to ruling-class politics?

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35. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 49.

36. Quoted in Peter Hallward, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2003), p. 44.

As Lenin put it, “politics is a concentrated expression of economics.”<sup>37</sup> Bourgeois class interests find concentrated expression in policy, leadership, party, and state. These class interests are fought out, forged and re-forged, articulated and rearticulated within and through a relatively autonomous political realm.

When Badiou says that “politics...cannot be rendered immediately transitive to a scientific, objective study of how class functions in society,” he is not only misrepresenting the existence and dynamics of class...he is not only reinforcing his own illusions about the class relations in society...he is also offering up a politics that would indefinitely condemn the masses to the rule of the imperialists, to the dominance of bourgeois class interests.

As Lenin so aptly put it, “people always were and always will be foolish victims of deceit and self-deceit in politics until they learn to discover the *interests* of some class or other behind all moral, religious, political and social phrases, declarations, and promises.”<sup>38</sup>

There can be no revolutionary movement unless the masses learn to recognize that their interests are in fundamental contrast and conflict with those of the bourgeoisie, and to have an understanding, too, of the class interests of other strata that are not part of the bourgeoisie but drawn to see the problems in society and the solution to these problems in bourgeois terms. The influence of the bourgeoisie is also exerted indirectly through the force of habit, tradition, and spontaneity which pull people in the direction of bourgeois class interest. For the masses to become emancipators of humanity, they must come to understand “how class functions in society”—and consciously act on that understanding.

Badiou’s view on class and politics is a recipe for being buffeted by, and tailing, spontaneity and for conciliating with all manner of class interests—not least because different class forces have different notions of what is “reactionary” and “emancipatory.” The irony is that this philosophical perspective on class and politics itself corresponds to the social position and outlook of a certain class in society, the petite bourgeoisie, which sees itself above the fray of contending class interests and struggles.

### **Badiou and the “Revolutionary Subject” for Marx**

Alain Badiou’s idealist rendering of politics is very much in play in his treatment of “revolutionary subject.” In an interview given in 2006, he offers his explanation of the significance of the proletariat to Marx:

The question of political processes is always a question that goes beyond identities. It’s the question of finding something that is, paradoxically, a generic identity, identity of no-identity, the identity which is beyond all identities. For Marx, ‘proletariat’ was the name of something like that. In the *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes that the very nature of the proletariat is to be generic. It’s not

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37. V.I. Lenin, “Once Again on the Trade Unions, the Present Situation and the Mistakes of Trotsky and Bukharin,” *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1943), p. 354.

38. Quoted in Avakian, *Phony Communism Is Dead*, p. 122.

an identity. It's something like an identity which is non-identity; *it's humanity as such*. That's why for Marx the liberation of the working class is liberation of humanity as such because the working class is something generic and not a pure identity. Probably that function of the working class is saturated.<sup>39</sup> [emphasis ours]

Badiou casts the proletariat here, or offers a Badiouist reading of the significance of the proletariat, in its “generic identity,” or humanity as such. What we get is a formulation of “identity-non-identity” that effaces the revolutionary role of the proletariat and the content of the proletarian revolution.

Badiou is of course offering an exegesis of a concept of the proletariat as elaborated in the early Marx, the Marx who had not fully ruptured with the idealism that he took over from Hegel. This is the Marx yet to fully develop and synthesize historical materialism, with his discovery of the central role that the contradiction between the forces and relations of production plays in the motion and development of human society. Nor has this early Marx fully recognized the motive force of the class struggle in the transformation of society and the final achievement of communism. There is a tendency at this early stage in Marx's work and understanding to see the proletariat in relation to a return to an ideal non-estranged state corresponding to “man's species character.” This is the source of much of Badiou's “humanity as such” rendering.

It is this early Marx, still working through his humanist Hegelian influences, that Badiou takes as his frame. But where Marx would develop a new, robust scientific framework of understanding, Badiou works through his early Marxist influences in the opposite direction: towards a humanism now taking the form of a “politics of emancipation” grounded in equality. As we have shown, this is a politics that will, and can only, remain confined within the framework of bourgeois society, with what are its inevitable, and profound, inequalities, and more fundamentally, its relations of exploitation.

In this regard, it is also revealing that Badiou's “politics of emancipation” not only seeks to break free of class inscription but is also, he emphasizes, a politics that disabuses itself of notions of “class interest.” Badiou argues that there is nothing particularly unique about “interests” in the human condition—interests express the struggle for survival common to all living species.<sup>40</sup> Rather, there are qualities and strivings, the highest of which is that for equality, embodied in different collectivities at different times. This is another example of Badiou's humanism.

In reality the significance of the proletariat resides in the *position of the proletariat as a class* (though this class is made up of real individuals) and in *where its interests lie as a class that opens up new possibility for humanity*. This is to say, the proletarian revolution brings about a qualitative leap in social relations. This is the new world that can be created by achieving the “4

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39. Diana George and Nic Veroli, *Interview with Alain Badiou*, 2006, *Carceraglio*.

Badiou gave this interview when he attended the “Is a History of the Cultural Revolution Possible?” conference at the Simpson Center for the Humanities at the University of Washington; hereafter cited as *University of Washington Interview*. ([http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/katz/20052006/alain\\_badiou.html](http://depts.washington.edu/uwch/katz/20052006/alain_badiou.html))

40. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 97.



Alls.” It is the actual *social relations* bound up with the emergence, revolutionary struggle, and ultimate dissolution of the proletariat as a class that are at the heart of the matter.

There is something else that Marx identifies in the condition of the proletariat that imparts revolutionary agency to this class. It is what he called, in a polemic against Proudhon, the “revolutionary destructive aspect [of poverty].”<sup>41</sup> This revolutionary destructiveness is bound up with its social conditions of existence and capacity to lead in the revolutionary overthrow of the old order and realization of new social relations.

In his treatment of the proletariat, Badiou moves far away from the matter of objective social relations. He combines a concept of the proletariat deriving from the early Marx with pragmatism (the proletariat as a useful or not-so-useful object of political representation):

The particularity of the working class was its location in a singular place; the working class was generic. The solution of the problem for Marxism was the human group which is not really an identity, which is beyond identity... Marx’s solution is a sort of miracle: you find the group which is also the generic group. It was an extraordinary invention. The history of the Marxist invention, in its concrete political determination, was not so much the history of the generic group, of the working class as such, but rather the history of the representation of this generic group in a political organization: it was the history of the party. The crisis now is the crisis of representation, and also the crisis of the idea of the generic group.<sup>42</sup>

Badiou is suggesting that Marx was searching for a generic or universal subject—and, miracle of miracles, he found, no “invented,” the proletariat. The proletariat becomes a subjective construct

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41. Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1977), p. 218. Marx in *Marx: On Proudhon (to J.B. Schweitzer)* states that Proudhon sees “in poverty nothing but poverty (instead of seeing in it the revolutionary, destructive aspect which will overthrow the old society.)”

In this light, it is worth considering Badiou’s assessment of the recent uprisings of immigrant youth in the banlieues, the poor proletarian and immigrant ghetto neighborhoods outside Paris and other French cities: “The revolts of November 2005, therefore, are very significant, but nothing came from them. They remain a bitter and negative experience ... Things will probably change, but for the moment this is the reason why nothing came of these revolts. And for the moment, all they do is revolt.” “All they do is revolt?” The point is that a critical section of the masses is alienated from and in open antagonism to state authority—and has risen up in just rebellion, all pointing to the need and the potential for revolution in a highly developed capitalist imperialist country like France. Badiou, from his framework of having given up on revolution, “the age of revolutions is over,” and what it will take to achieve that—communist ideology and vanguard leadership—misses all of this to arrive at a negative summation of these rebellions.

Badiou goes on to compare this with the urban rebellions of Black masses in the ’60s in the U.S.: “The repetition of these revolts—as was the case in the large cities of the U.S. in the 1960s—cannot be creative of any politics.” Compare this orientation with Mao’s famous statement in support of the uprisings of Black people in the United States in April 1968, which he described as “a new clarion call to all the exploited and oppressed people of the United States...”

Badiou quotes from Del Lucchese and Smith, “We Need a Popular Discipline: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative,” Interview with Alain Badiou, Los Angeles, 2/07/07, pp. 658-659.

42. Badiou, University of Washington Interview.

to serve a pre-determined revolutionary politics that would find its highest incarnation in a practice of a politics of party representation and organization.

Badiou distorts Marx's method—and reality—in this accounting of the nature and identity (or non-identity) of the revolutionary subject.

The proletariat was formed historically. It emerges with the development of the capitalist mode of production. The significance of the proletariat in human history resides, again, in its potential to move society to a qualitatively different mode of production and social organization. This potential, however, can only be realized through revolutionary political organization and conscious political struggle aimed at emancipating all of humanity.

The point is this: The proletariat was not Marx's "invention" to codify a certain politics—no more so than Crick and Watson "invented" DNA to suit a certain practice of genetics. These are not constructs but scientific discoveries.

### ***The Revolutionary Subject: Particularity and Universality***

In the interview cited above, Badiou asserts that part of the miracle of this "invention" of the proletariat as revolutionary class is that Marx is able to identify the proletariat as "non-identity" with "humanity as such." Badiou elaborates his thinking in discussing what he considers to be the challenge now before a post-Marxist politics:

We cannot substitute a mere collection of identities for the saturated generic identity of the working class. I think we have to find the political determination that integrates the identities, the principles of which are beyond identity. The great difficulty is to do that without something like the working class. Without something that was a connection *between particularity and universality*, because that's what the working class was.<sup>43</sup> [emphasis ours]

Badiou is obscuring the historical particularity of the proletariat, what underlies its general class interests, and how it stands in relation to other classes.

Badiou uses the phrases "generic" and "strictly generic humanity" to describe what he calls the "common trait" of particular collectivities throughout human history founded not on self (and particular) interests but on a higher principle of generality. For Badiou, this principle of principles, as we have seen, is the idea of equality. Badiou's concept of the "generic" is a construct that erases class divisions and distinctions in the name of "a radically egalitarian homogeneity" (to use Peter Hallward's apt phrase).

The "generic" takes hold in new ways in singular political situations that "bring about a representation of the collective capacity on the basis of a rigorous equality between each of their

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43. Ibid.

agents.”<sup>44</sup> The proletariat in Badiou’s schema was perhaps, or for a time, a species of this sort of “generic humanity.”

Let’s recast this in Marxist terms. What, from a scientific communist standpoint, is it about the proletariat, and the proletarian revolution, in its “particularity” that partakes of “universality”—and why has the historic role of the proletariat not been “saturated”?

Capitalism has a universalizing tendency. It *binds the world together* in a single network of production and exchange—even as its mode of existence is private, as “many capitals” in competitive interaction. It tends towards the generalization of the capitalist wage relation on a world scale. It imposes its productive norms on local, regional, and national systems of production. This is a historical process that took a leap with the development of capitalism into capitalism-imperialism, and it continues to unfold.

This universalizing tendency does not unfold evenly; nor is it a process of simple flattening and homogenization. This universalizing tendency, and the accumulation of capital itself, operates through the division of the world into oppressor and oppressed nations; through national-state rivalry; and through highly concentrated and centralized aggregations of capital (monopoly). Further, capitalism generates new forms of differentiation and hierarchy and continues to utilize, while modifying, pre-capitalist relations of production (such as semi-feudal agriculture in Third World countries). Yet through all this contradictory motion, capital exerts a real tendency towards the universalization of its productive norms, of wage labor, and social relations.

The proletariat is, as an *international class*, linked to globally interconnected processes of production and *dispossessed of all property in means of production*. It is a universal class in that it lacks any particular-parochial interest to defend; it cannot, as a class, free itself without freeing all of humanity and abolishing the very division of society into classes. The proletarian revolution aims to *affect the whole world*. This revolution and only this revolution can speak to the *highest aspirations of world humanity* and forge the material and social conditions to actually emancipate it.

The proletariat is not, *contra* Badiou, one of many possible generic identities of no-identity, or one of many possible categories of the universal. It is born of real material and social processes. Its potential as “revolutionary subject” is founded on its objective position as the main exploited class in capitalism. It is the backbone of modern socialized production and the larger social division of labor flowing from that production involving other strata, like professionals, etc.

The objective position of the proletariat yields both a need, bound up with its conditions of servitude, and a capacity, bound up with its specific relation to advanced social productive forces and with the “revolutionary destructive aspect” of poverty, to make revolution—and instantiate new relations of production that enable humanity to cross a historic threshold.

Herein lie the proletariat’s “general interests.” The notion of proletarian *class interest* is neither a narrow trade-unionist calculus of material benefit, nor a modality, as Badiou suggests, of a

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44. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 97.

struggle for survival. Rather, the proletariat has the potential to lead and give shape to a revolution (the seizure of power) and to an ongoing process of revolutionary transformation within society and on a world scale that make possible not just the elimination of one or another form of exploitation but all forms of exploitation and oppression, and of class distinctions generally.

It is important, however, not to confuse or directly identify the fundamental and strategic interests of the proletariat, as a class and in a historic sense, with the interests, or activity and state of consciousness and aspirations, of particular individuals or groupings of the “working class.” Communism as a science, as a revolutionary political movement, and as a goal transcends particular individuals. At the same time, it encompasses the oppression and emancipation of particular individuals—even though this understanding is not necessarily manifested in individuals, including within the working class: either as a felt need, partisan ideology, or goal.

This “reification of the proletariat” has been a significant tendency in the international communist movement. It was especially pronounced in Stalin’s approach to socialist society (for instance, the idea that simply by training people of proletarian background to become managers, you would necessarily be ensuring against bourgeois and petit-bourgeois influences); and was also a problem in China and the Cultural Revolution, where there were strong tendencies to equate class outlook with class origins (the notion that workers or peasants would necessarily be inclined towards revolutionary thinking). This problem of reification has been identified and extensively criticized by Bob Avakian. And it is indeed very necessary to do so now in order for communism to advance as a science and as a revolutionary movement; but, that needs to be done on a materialist, and dialectical, basis—not on the basis of a fundamental departure from materialism and dialectics. And therein lies Badiou’s problem.

Criticizing reification is not the same as saying that there is no proletarian social base for revolution. There is, but it cannot be understood in economist terms, in terms of a trade union movement. Nor can it be understood without taking fully into account the phenomenon that Lenin analyzed—that with the development of imperialism, there occurs, particularly in the imperialist countries themselves, a split in the working class between, broadly speaking, its upper, more bourgeoisified strata and the lower, deeper sections of the proletariat, whose interests generally correspond to those of the proletariat as a class of modern wage slaves, and among whom the proletarian revolution must be based.

Nor, for that matter, will the proletarian revolution be identical with the struggle of the proletariat, as such, in some kind of one-to-one way. Such a revolution must and will involve broad numbers from among different strata of the people—and, among the proletariat itself, some will, at least for a time, be drawn to banners and programs representing in fact other class forces. But, through the whole process of the revolutionary struggle, the outlook and interests of the proletariat must be brought to the fore, truly massive numbers of people, particularly from the proletariat but from other strata as well, must be won to the cause embodying those interests and that outlook, and on that basis the revolution must be fought through. And the key link in all this—and in bringing forward a critical mass of proletarians as a backbone force in this revolution—is overall political-ideological work guided by a scientific communist outlook and

method, and the lines and policies that are developed on the basis of applying that outlook and method.

Badiou argues that the “saturation” of the proletariat as “revolutionary subject,” or at least Marx’s subjective construct of such a class, throws up the challenge to find a new identity beyond identities—one that will not partake of the same kind of universalism linked to a particular social class.

But the need and basis of the proletariat, as a force in society and the world, that can take humanity to a whole other place, realizing the “4 Alls”—this has not been “saturated.” It will not be saturated as long as capitalism exists in the world. It will not be saturated as long as the basis for the re-emergence of class society continues to exist in the world, including in socialist society.

### **The World Has Changed But Proletarian Revolution Is Needed More, Not Less**

There have been massive and significant restructurations of the proletariat since the end of World War 2 and, more recently, through a new wave of imperialist globalization following the restoration of capitalism in China in 1976 and the collapse of the Soviet social-imperialist bloc in 1989-91. There is heightened parasitism, de-proletarianization, and expansion of the middle strata in the imperial heartlands; shifts in the international division of labor leading to the emergence of new nodes and networks of capitalist production in the Third World; semi-proletarianization and shantytown-ization in the cities of the Third World. In the U.S., the proletariat is highly stratified, with significant caste-like segmentations and divisions bound up with the oppression of Black people and other minority nationalities, and immigrants, and the subordination of women in society.

These and other developments pose major challenges for building a revolutionary movement, including the need to go deeper, among the most oppressed sections of the proletariat, and to go among wide sections of society, including and especially among all strata of youth, of women, and among intellectuals. These and other developments also have enormous implications for revolutionary strategy and the revolutionary seizure of power.

Badiou surveys the same changes in order to muster an argument that the concept of class is no longer “useful” and that revolution is no longer possible (“the age of revolutions is over”).

But the world cries out for revolution more than ever.

The question—including in the imperialist countries—comes down to this: Are you going to make a revolution; will it be the kind of revolution that proceeds from the worldwide achievement of the “4 Alls”; and are you going to—on a scientific, materialist and dialectical basis—bring forward the social base and broader social forces for such a revolution? Or are you going to tinker and reform on the edges of the present society?

As we shall see through the course of this polemic, Alain Badiou has opted for the latter, awash in his egalitarian—and reformist—politics “at a distance from the state” (renouncing the seizure

of state power). This amounts to a *modus vivendi* with imperialism, the “space” for which is based on a profound inequality: the division between the oppressor and oppressed nations in this imperialist-dominated world. The relative stability of the imperialist social formations rests on international superexploitation and plunder—enforced by imperialist armies and interventions, neocolonial regimes, imperialist-dominated financial institutions, and torture chambers.

**“’Tis the Final Conflict...” or “’Tis the Final Reconciliation”?**

In a recent work, *The Century*, Alain Badiou reflects on what he calls the “second revolutionary sequence” of communist revolution as well as a social landscape of war and capitalist grotesqueries. He observes that the 20<sup>th</sup> century was dominated by a “combative conception of existence”<sup>45</sup> and that the communist movement was characterized in its orientation by the elevation of social conflict. Badiou extols the Paris Commune and upholds the just violence of the oppressed. He speaks of the central role of struggle. But the paradigm of revolutionary conflict as the struggle for state power led by a vanguard party ... this he concludes is also “saturated.”

As we have indicated, Badiou insinuates a kind of humanism into his political philosophy:

The modern politics of emancipation freed from the dialectic scheme of classes and parties has as its aim something like a generic democracy, a promotion of the commonplace, of a quality abstracted from any predicate—so it’s possible to speak of a generic politics, and a warfield of prose such as Samuel Beckett’s, which tried by successive subtraction to designate the naked existence of generic humanity.<sup>46</sup>

Freed from the “the dialectic scheme of classes and parties,” Badiou’s “modern politics of emancipation” is also freed from reality: severed from the reality of classes, exploitative production relations, and the bourgeois state as the concentration point of organized violence. It is this network of social relations and the state power that enforces it, however, that constitutes the “problem” before the masses of oppressed humanity and ultimately all humanity—and it cannot be idealized away in the declaration of the “generic.”

At best, Alain Badiou wants to transcend class without all the struggle and transformation, without all the revolutions, and without the dictatorship of the proletariat and an entire era of socialist transition that will be required to actually overcome class division and to achieve those “two most radical ruptures” that Marx identified: with traditional property relations and with traditional ideas.

Let us return again to Marx’s profound and trenchant commentary on the outlook and illusions of the democratic intellectual:

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45. Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 37.

46. Alain Badiou, *On the Truth-Process: An open lecture by Alain Badiou*, August 2002. Transcript of lecture at European Graduate School, EGS, Saas-Fee, Switzerland. (<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/badiou/badiou-truth-process-2002.html>)

...[O]ne must not form the narrow-minded notion that the petite bourgeoisie, on principle, wishes to enforce an egoistic class interest. Rather, it believes that the *special conditions* of its emancipation are the *general* conditions within the frame of which modern society can be saved and the class struggle avoided. Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petite bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the *political* and *literary representatives* of a class and the class they represent.

But the democrat, because he represents the petite bourgeoisie, that is, a transition class, in which the interests of the two classes are simultaneously mutually blunted, imagines himself elevated above class antagonism generally.<sup>47</sup> [emphasis in original]

Enter stage left, Alain Badiou the radical democratic intellectual of Maoist provenance. He gazes back at the 20<sup>th</sup> century, appalled by the horrors perpetrated by the bourgeoisie but also by what he misperceives as the “bureaucratic authoritarianism” of proletarian rule. He is driven to a politics, and to formulating a philosophy of politics, of “generic equality” and “generic democracy,” trumpeted as a new site and new project of emancipation. It is the realm of the imaginary posing as the general interests of humanity. Exit stage right.

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47. Marx, “The Eighteenth Brumaire,” p. 121.

# **CHAPTER III: ALAIN BADIOU AND THE DICTATORSHIP OF THE PROLETARIAT, OR WHY THE REJECTION OF THE “PARTY-STATE FRAMEWORK” IS THE REJECTION OF REVOLUTION**

## **Introduction**

As addressed in the Introduction to this polemic, the communist project is at a crossroads. The first wave of socialist revolutions came to an end with the overthrow of proletarian power in China in 1976. At the same time, vast changes have taken place in the world imperialist system, affecting economic and social life. All of this is throwing up big questions about the historical experience of proletarian revolution and about what it means to make revolution—or whether it is possible, or desirable, to make revolution—in today’s world.

The question of the dictatorship of the proletariat is a key concentration point of the issues and challenges thrown up at this crossroads moment. There is a sharp battle for summation: over the legacy and lessons of socialist revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and a correct understanding of the need for, and the contradictions bound up with, a leading party and a new type of state under socialism.

*Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage—A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA* presents this framework of evaluation and summation of historical experience:

The first stage of the communist revolution went a long way, and achieved incredibly inspiring things, in fighting to overcome the very real obstacles it faced and to advance toward a world where all relations of exploitation and oppression would be finally eliminated and people would enjoy a whole new dimension of freedom and would undertake the organization and continuing transformation of society, throughout the world, with a conscious and voluntary initiative unprecedented in history. But, not surprisingly, there were also shortcomings and real errors, sometimes very serious ones, both in the practical steps that were taken by those leading these revolutions and the new societies they brought forth, and in their conceptions and methods. These shortcomings and errors were not the *cause* of the defeats of the initial attempts at communist revolution, but they did contribute, even if secondarily, to that defeat; and, beyond that, this whole experience of the first stage—with both its truly inspiring achievements and its very real, at times very serious, even if overall secondary, errors and shortcomings—must be learned from deeply and all-sidedly, in order to carry forward the communist revolution in the new situation that has to be confronted, and to do even better this time.<sup>48</sup>

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48. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*, p. 22.



The bourgeoisie, of course, has its evaluation: socialism was an unmitigated disaster, a false utopia turned nightmare. Not only does this utterly distort the goals, methods, and “lived reality” of these revolutions; it also conveniently screens out how imperialists and other reactionary forces sought to strangle these revolutions—whether through military encirclement and attack, unremitting economic pressure, or ideological bombardment.

The Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions were undertaking something as bold as it was untried—to build societies free from exploitation and oppression—and doing so in conditions not of their own choosing. They made the transformation of the material reality and conditions of the masses their priority, and in so doing opened new horizons to literally hundreds of millions of people who, before those revolutions, had effectively been doomed to lives of grinding exploitation, misery, and early deaths. So the serious summation of both achievements and shortcomings that is called for and undertaken in the above-quoted *Manifesto*—founded on an understanding of what these revolutions actually accomplished, what they were setting out to do, and the methodological tools and assumptions they employed to carry through those transformations—is absolutely necessary.

But Alain Badiou does not provide such a summation. In recent works like *Polemics*, *The Century*, and *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou surveys the momentous upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. He recognizes the genuinely liberatory impulse driving these explosions; he recognizes that a genuinely revolutionary project informed their agendas. But—and this is his global summation—these revolutions proved in the end to be failures. And, even more importantly, these revolutions were doomed to failure.

Why? Because, according to Badiou, they were “imprisoned” within the “framework of the party-state,” that is, the theory and practice of *seizing* state power through an insurrectionary politics and *constructing* a new state power, under the leadership of a vanguard communist party.

Stalin, in Badiou’s eyes, gives to the “party-state framework” its most grotesque bureaucratic-authoritarian expression. Mao is different ... but not so different. In Badiou’s telling, Mao strains at the limits and “logic” of the party-state. He launches the Cultural Revolution that contains within it the potential to break the vise-grip of an oppressive “party-state” apparatus. But Mao pulls back and ultimately becomes the protector of this apparatus.

Badiou theorizes his anti-statist politics along two tracks. One track retains some conceptual vocabulary of Marxism and argues with reference to certain texts of Marx (and the authority of Marx). This track ferries the argument that upon victory, the Russian and Chinese revolutions should have immediately moved to scale down and quickly dissolve the repressive and governing apparatus of the state. Instead, the state was strengthened, in consequence of which political life was hemmed in and suffocated.

The other track, and the main one along which Badiou has transported his thinking in recent years, is that the very idea of taking power is problematical: state power is neither feasible (there can be no insurrectionary politics in today’s world) nor desirable (the state—any state—is intrinsically oppressive).

Beginning with Marx, and based on soberly and rigorously summing up the experience of real attempts at revolution, communists have drawn the scientific conclusion that there is an indissoluble link between state power and revolution. One can offer up a radical politics, even call it “emancipatory,” as is Badiou’s wont. But absent the conquest of state power—that is, a real revolution that shatters the economic, political, and military power of the ruling exploiting class—there can be no fundamental and revolutionary transformation of society. This principle—the dictatorship of the proletariat—has been, and remains, a crucial dividing line between revolutionary communism and reformism.

Today, with communism at the beginning of a new stage, and with the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat posed anew, Alain Badiou comes down this way:

Marxism, the workers’ movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the proletarian party, the Socialist state—all these remarkable inventions of the twentieth century—are no longer of practical use.<sup>49</sup>

And as he put it in 2006:

For the sake of all of the world’s revolutionaries, the Cultural Revolution effectively explored the limits of Leninism. It taught us that the politics of *emancipation can no longer work under the paradigm of revolution*, nor remain prisoner to the party-form.<sup>50</sup> [emphasis ours]

It has now become Badiou’s habit to refer to the revolutionary upheavals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as constitutive of states and societies that turned into “monstrosities.” In this, Alain Badiou joins the liberal anti-communist chorus in his summation of *communism in power*. But he sets himself apart by affixing the label communism to a radical democratic project (the Rousseau-ian, egalitarian ideal) operationalized “at a distance from the state.” Thus, *a communism with no ambition for power* (the subject of Chapter 5 of this polemic).

In this chapter, we take on Badiou’s view that the socialist state should begin to wither away immediately and that any strengthening of this state is antithetical to the achievement of communism; and Badiou’s view that communist parties that organized revolutions to seize power proved ill-suited to becoming parties in power. We will show the remarkable lack of dialectics, materialism, and historical truth underlying Badiou’s core arguments about the dictatorship of the proletariat and the vanguard party that must lead it. In the next chapter, we will directly address his analysis of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution.

### **What the Socialist State Is Good For, How It Will Wither Away, and Why Alain Badiou Winds Up With the Bourgeois State**

Karl Marx opened up a new scientific understanding of socialism, as a form of state and as a revolutionary transition:

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49. Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 113.

50. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 518.

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*.<sup>51</sup> [emphasis in original]

The essence of the socialist period, as Marx also wrote, is that it is a “transition to the abolition of all classes and to a classless society.”<sup>52</sup> Socialism is an historical era and historical process the aim and purpose of which is to eliminate the basis for the division of society into classes: in underlying production relations, in social relations, and in the superstructure of politics, culture, and ideas (what the Chinese communists came to call the “4 Alls”). This is what the dictatorship of the proletariat serves. And through this process of revolutionary struggle and transformation, the necessity and bases for this class dictatorship, and for any kind of organized apparatus of repression by which one group in society dominates another, is also overcome.

The historical practice of proletarian revolution has provided inestimable experience for understanding the nature and challenges of this transition. Communist theory has advanced qualitatively. Mao, basing himself on a thorough analysis of both the Soviet and Chinese revolutions, analyzed that throughout the socialist period there would remain the material conditions posing the danger of defeat for the socialist revolution; he identified class struggle as the central task of the socialist transition; and he discovered the means for waging the class struggle under socialism: to continue the revolution against old and new bourgeois forces, and to carry forward the all-around transformation of society and people. Bob Avakian, founding his work on a deep study of Mao and going further into the contradictions inherent in socialist society as a period of revolutionary transformation to communism, has brought forward a model of socialist society with an even richer and more dynamic process of contestation, ferment, and experimentation in the context of and serving the worldwide revolutionary advance towards communism.

But for all these breakthroughs in the experience of proletarian revolution and in communist theory, what remains central about the dictatorship of the proletariat derives from Marx’s original scientific insight: the socialist period is one of revolutionary transition and transformation to classless society, requiring a new kind of state.

Invoking the authority of Marx, Alain Badiou makes this argument about the state:

The party had been an appropriate tool for the overthrow of weakened reactionary regimes, but it proved ill-adapted for the construction of *the ‘dictatorship of the*

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51. Marx, “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” p. 538.

52. In 1852, Marx wrote to Weydemeyer, “As to myself, no credit is due to me for discovering the existence of classes in modern society, nor yet the struggle between them. Long before me, bourgeois historians had described the historical development of this struggle of the classes, and bourgeois economists the economic anatomy of the classes. What I did that was new was to prove: 1) that the *existence of classes* is only bound up with *particular historical phases in the development of production*; 2) that the class struggle necessarily leads to the *dictatorship of the proletariat*; 3) that this dictatorship itself only constitutes the transition to the *abolition of all classes and to a classless society*.” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 220. [emphasis in original]

*proletariat' in the sense that Marx had intended—that is, a temporary state, organizing the transition to the non-state: its dialectical 'withering away.'*<sup>53</sup>  
[emphasis ours]

Badiou's characterization of the socialist state is key both to his reading of the first wave of socialist revolution and to his explicitly post-Marxist, and in fact anti-Marxist, notion of a radical "politics at a distance from the state" (a concept which we address in Chapter 5).

First, the essential thing for Badiou, with his formulation of "*a temporary state, organizing the transition to the non-state,*" is that there must be a relatively immediate reduction, a kind of linear "draw-down," of socialist state power and function—a process to start soon after the conquest of power. Second, Badiou holds that any consolidation and strengthening of the dictatorship of the proletariat necessarily blocks the process through which the state will wither away and leads ineluctably to bureaucratic authoritarianism.

Badiou is correct about one thing. Marx did envision a relatively short period of socialist transition.

On the one hand, Marx anticipated the relatively rapid spread of proletarian revolution, especially in the advanced capitalist countries. But capitalism evolved into imperialism, which has greatly complicated the revolutionary process—in particular, retarding the development of revolution in the advanced capitalist countries at the same time that the principal locus of revolutionary upsurge shifted to the zones of the oppressed nations, where the productive forces have been less developed.

On the other hand, Marx foresaw that, after the proletariat seized power, there would be a relatively telescoped process of overcoming commodity production and exchange through money (these were expected as starting points of the transition). But this, too, has proved to be a more complicated process of deep-going material and ideological transformation.

What has been learned—and Mao broke new conceptual ground for communism—is that the still-existing gaps between mental and manual labor, between town and country, and other social differences and inequalities are the breeding ground for new privileged and bourgeois forces in socialist society. These inequalities and the emergence of new bourgeois forces in socialist society interact with the still dominant position of imperialism on a world scale.

We now understand, in a way that Marx and Engels (and even Lenin as the leader of the first socialist state) did not, that the process of achieving communism on a world scale will be a complex and protracted one, involving:

- Developing a planned, sustainable socialist economy to meet social need, to move beyond commodity production to production for direct social use, and to move towards ensuring a *common* material abundance to serve the needs of world humanity;

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53. Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis," p. 36.

- Uprooting all the vestiges and inequalities of class society carried over to socialist society, such as the division between mental and manual labor, town and country, and men and women—along with the reflections and reinforcements of all of this in the realm of ideas, values, and force of habit;
- Combating and preventing capitalist restoration;
- Advancing the world revolution and defeating world imperialism.

Alain Badiou’s litmus test of “a temporary state organizing the transition to the non-state” is devoid of comprehension of the real world complexities and contradictions, and the monumental tasks, of the worldwide transition to communism.

This has particular relevance to the question of the standing army in socialist society. Alain Badiou has also spoken of an “obsession with victory” that marked the socialist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and a singular failure on the part of the socialist states to draw down the repressive apparatus. A core element of his critique of Mao’s conduct of the Cultural Revolution was that Mao did not move to disband, and explicitly opposed the disbanding of, the regular army (a point to which we return, in detail, in Chapter 4).

It is true that the state is concentrated in the monopoly of legitimate armed force (and the withering away of the state, what Badiou calls the “non-state,” is marked by the disappearance of such instrumentalities). So the question is posed: Can you, in a short time after the seizure of power, disband the regular, standing army and dispense with its functions? This is not possible, for two fundamental reasons:

First, historical experience shows that any revolutionary state will be threatened constantly with imperialist invasion. We cannot believe that Badiou is unaware of the ways in which this has gone down: the invasion of the Soviet Union by over a dozen imperialist armies during the bitter civil war after the seizure of power; the brutal onslaught of the German *Wermacht* in World War 2; the U.S. moves towards invading China in the early stages of the Korean War, including consideration of the use of nuclear weapons, etc. Closely in league with imperialism have been the overthrown bourgeoisie and other exploiting classes within the socialist country itself, which, while subject to the “dictatorship of the proletariat” and prevented from organizing counter-revolutionary activities, are nevertheless fortified by imperialism worldwide and by their prior experience in ruling society, their connections with powerful ruling classes in other parts of the world, the continuing existence of significant remnants of the old society in both the economic base and the superstructure of the new socialist society, as well as by the force of habit and tradition, and other factors. To protect the new society and its transformations and to maintain it as a base area for further revolutionary advance, to stand up to these reactionary forces who attempt to strangle it from the time it is brought into being—this has proven to require a standing army with a significant degree of specialization and professionalization.

Second, bourgeois class forces continue to exist, and new bourgeois elements are constantly regenerated in socialist society. To attempt to “arm the whole people”—in place of a specialized military body, a standing army, under the leadership of the communist vanguard—would in fact lead to different armies taking shape under the command of different class forces, including the

bourgeoisie. And many of those forces would themselves seek out alliances with foreign imperialist powers and other reactionary states.

Bob Avakian spoke to this in some depth in “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That,” a polemic against an earlier erstwhile Maoist, K. Venu, who mounted many arguments similar to those of Badiou. In this polemic, discussing the role of both the army and of militias in socialist society, Avakian wrote:

This, of course, does not mean that it is unimportant to arm the broad masses under socialism and that the standing army can be relied on by itself to safeguard the rule of the proletariat. In fact, both from the point of view of combating armed counterrevolutionary attacks (and imperialist aggression) *and* from the point of view of carrying out the revolutionary transformation of society toward the abolition of class divisions (and, with them, the state), it is necessary and vital to have a situation in which the broad masses are “in arms” and, more than that, are organized and trained, in a vast people’s militia, alongside the standing army of the proletarian state (until such time as the standing army *can* be abolished).

But the decisive question, both with regard to the standing army and with regard to the people’s militia, is whether the guns are in the hands of the masses *in actual fact* and *not just formally*. This question hinges on the nature of leadership that is exercised in the standing army and the militia. And, in turn, the nature of this leadership finds concentrated expression in *line*—both ideological and political line in its general expression and also its expression in concrete policies. This involves the internal relations within the armed forces (including the militia) and the relations between these armed forces and the masses of people; it also involves the formulation of the fundamental purpose and aim of these armed forces and the principles of fighting, doctrine, and so on that flow from this.<sup>54</sup>

The point is that socialist state power has been, and is, needed a) to defend the socialist society in transition and b) to make possible the revolutionary transformations that, in connection with the spread and deepening of proletarian revolution on a world scale and in promoting the advance of world revolution, will create the conditions to eliminate the need and basis for the state. The strengthening of the socialist state is the strengthening of the instrumentality required to actually carry forward the transition to classless society. But Badiou refuses to engage all this and instead seems to hope to declare it *passé* by lightly labeling concepts and principles painfully distilled from real historical experience as “saturated.”

To be clear, the socialist state must be, and must increasingly become, a radically different kind of state. This has been stressed not just by Marx, but by Lenin and then especially Mao, even as they confronted the agonizingly complicated problems of building a new world when the old one was far from buried. And it forms a foundational point of departure in Avakian’s new synthesis. While there have at times been tendencies, especially pronounced in Stalin, to see the withering away of the state as an almost built-in product of the continuous development of socialist society,

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54. Avakian, “Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That,” pp. 196-97.

it simply will not do for Badiou to turn a blind eye to the actual grappling with this question, including the actual search for practical forms, by those who have based themselves on and actually carried forward the real scientific insights on the state first formulated by Marx and Engels.

How then do we understand this process of the withering away of the state, if it is not, as Badiou suggests, the “temporary state organizing the transition to the non-state”? Bob Avakian has captured the real dialectics of this process in *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*:

...the withering away of the state, in turn, must be seen not as the “evaporation” or “dissolving” of the state apparatus one fine day, suddenly or all at once out of nowhere, but as the result of a dialectical process—and a determined struggle—through which the relations and the people in society undergo revolutionary transformation. As Marx already emphasized, in summing up the historical experience of the first (and short-lived) proletarian state, the Paris Commune of 1871, the proletarians “in order to work out their own emancipation, and along with it that higher form to which present society is irresistibly tending by its own economical agencies...will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men.” *This process—this struggle—is dialectical in a two-fold sense: it involves the dialectical relationship between dictatorship and democracy in socialist society...and it involves the dialectical relation—the unity and opposition—between strengthening the dictatorship of the proletariat and, at the same time, by the same means, creating step by step, but also through a series of revolutionary leaps, the conditions whereby the dictatorship of the proletariat will no longer be necessary... or possible.* The process—the struggle—involving the elimination of the inequalities and contradictions left over from and characteristic of capitalism and the bourgeois epoch is the path along which communism will finally be achieved worldwide, and the state—and along with it democracy—will finally wither away: the transformation of circumstances and people to achieve the elimination of “bourgeois right” and the division of labor attendant to class-divided society, in all their manifestations; the abolition of commodity production and exchange and the necessity of money as a medium of exchange, and their replacement by conscious planning of production and exchange—involving both unity and diversity, both centralized guidelines and widespread initiative—all in accordance with the basic principle “from each according to his ability to each according to his needs,” the overcoming of inequalities and antagonisms between women and men, and between different nationalities and regions...the transcending of national as well as class divisions and the creation of a true world community of humanity, consciously uniting—and wrangling—to achieve the continuous all-round development of human society and the human beings who comprise it.<sup>55</sup>  
[emphasis ours]

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55. Avakian, *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?*, pp. 253-54.

With this understanding, Avakian has emphasized the critical task of consciously transforming the socialist state itself: “actually developing concrete forms and institutions that lead in th[e] direction” of the actual withering away of the state.

Some of the seeds of this could be seen in the base-level forms of power created in China during the Cultural Revolution; the combination of economic, administrative, and military function within the people’s communes; and some of the decentralized structures of “area planning” in which local areas took direct responsibility for coordinating development within the unified framework of revolutionary China’s planned economy.

But significant as these were, they were *seeds*; and Avakian’s new synthesis envisions institutional arrangements (and experimentation) that go beyond these and involves a more conscious orientation and struggle around the issue of the withering away of the state. The exact form (and forms) this motion will take in future socialist societies will no doubt be varied. What is essential, however, is that there must be transformation of the political and social institutions of proletarian rule towards “the ‘spreading out’ of the functions of administering society,” so that masses taking “responsibility for the various spheres of society will in fact be a major factor in the achievement of the situation where the state, and with it democracy as a formal structure, can wither away.”

In light of this understanding, Badiou’s attempt to one-sidedly and mechanically reduce the socialist state to the organized transition to the non-state would simply abort the process of getting to communism—by handing power back to the bourgeoisie. In a world divided into classes, the bourgeoisie will not let up for an instant.

### ***A Brief Note on Philosophy***

Despite his use of the word “dialectical” to denote Marx’s conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat, Alain Badiou has rejected the theory of contradiction:

During the phase of party politics, the logical paradigm was the Hegelian dialectic; it was the theory of contradiction. During the entire development of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, the theory of contradiction was the heart of the logical framework. In my conviction, that is also finished.<sup>56</sup>

Here we cannot enter into a discussion of Badiou’s conflation of the Hegelian contradiction with materialist dialectics, nor the death sentence he pronounces on materialist dialectics. What is salient for this discussion, however, is that Alain Badiou sees paradoxes, or irresolvable contradictions, and reinterprets real-world contradictions through this lens. Instead of seeing both unity and opposition in the contradiction embodied in the existence of the socialist state, and grasping a genuinely dialectical approach to this contradiction, Badiou only sees opposition between the different aspects, an irresolvable paradox: the strengthening of a state which should be impermanent. In light of which, it is salutary to consider the following passage from Mao’s

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56. Badiou, University of Washington Interview.



*On Contradiction*, which speaks to both the issues under discussion and issues of dialectics and method:

To consolidate the dictatorship of the proletariat or the dictatorship of the people is in fact to prepare the conditions for abolishing this dictatorship and advancing to the higher stage when all state systems are eliminated. To establish and build the Communist Party is in fact to prepare the conditions for the elimination of the Communist Party and all political parties. To build a revolutionary army under the leadership of the Communist Party and to carry on revolutionary war is in fact to prepare the conditions for the permanent elimination of war. These opposites are at the same time complementary.<sup>57</sup>

Communism has gained deeper understanding about the nature of these very contradictions and the need to work consciously towards their resolution in the interests of world humanity and the achievement of world communism. But the methodological and theoretical point remains: the socialist state under communist leadership is “preparing conditions” towards its dissolution—it is doing so, and can only do so, by dealing with the real-world, and very profound, contradictions which it must confront, and transform, in order to advance, through a whole epoch of struggle, fundamentally on a global scale, to the achievement of the actual basis for the withering away of the state—as opposed to the mere imagining of this withering away, which once again will only contribute to the triumph and perpetuation of the *bourgeois* state.

#### *Alain Badiou’s Gloss on the Historical Achievements of Socialist Societies*

Badiou’s assessment of the socialist experience is two-fold. On the one hand, he speaks of the “despotism” of the party, the “monstrosity” that was the experience of communism in power, the “violent bureaucratic confrontations” of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, and this is not unrelated, he reads the achievements of these revolutions and societies through a social-welfarist lens.

Here is his cursory, throw-away characterization of the transformations in these societies:

Some of these regimes made real strides in education, public health, the valorization of labour, and so on; and they provided an international constraint on the arrogance of the imperialist powers. However the statist principle in itself proved corrupt and, in the long run, ineffective.<sup>58</sup>

Badiou’s intense hatred of the dictatorship of the proletariat produces this amazing gloss on, or rather glossing over of, the liberatory thrust and achievements of the first wave of socialist revolution. His appraisal of “strides in education, public health...” could just as well be applied to Scandinavia.

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57. Mao Tsetung, “On Contradiction,” *Selected Works*, Vol. I, p. 339.

58. Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” p. 11.

There is no sense of the revolutionary Soviet Union—and even more of socialist China—as radically different types of states, where the “real strides in education, public health, the valorization of labour” were made on the basis of a revolutionary state power serving the masses and increasingly exercised by the masses; with economies not driven by exploitation and the profit imperative but oriented to meet the needs of the people and transform society, and ultimately the world as a whole, towards communism; of the efforts to develop a new revolutionary collective and cooperative ethos, relations and ideas; of societies striving to promote world revolution—but, yes, also marked by shortcomings, and quite serious ones in the case of the Soviet Union.

The achievements were unprecedented. These were societies oriented and led towards transforming economic relations, revolutionizing social relations and thinking. Alain Badiou fails to mention the *changes in relations between women and men* that characterized the socialist Soviet Union and socialist China—the eradication of prostitution, or the radical changes in the status of women in revolutionary China, compared to the foot-binding and concubine-feudalism of pre-revolutionary China. Badiou fails to mention the breakthroughs of the Soviet state, particularly in its first two decades, in attacking the *inequalities* between nations and nationalities that had made pre-revolutionary Russia the “prisonhouse of nationalities.” Badiou fails to mention China’s achievement of self-sufficiency in food and meeting of basic needs *without* relying on exploitative relations, within the country or in relations with other countries.

Alain Badiou fails to mention that the “strides in education” were oriented towards *narrowing the traditional divides* in society, towards throwing open the doors of universities to the children of peasants and workers in China, especially during the Cultural Revolution. He fails to mention the breakthroughs in creating revolutionary culture, such as in the transformation of Chinese opera and the projection of powerful images of revolutionary women. He fails to mention the forging of a societal outlook of “serve the people,” instead of the “me-first” self-serving individualism of capitalism. Alain Badiou fails to mention the revolutionary internationalism of the Soviet Union in promoting and supporting revolutionary struggles around the world, even with certain errors that were made in the course of this, and particularly in the context of the looming threat, and then the devastating reality, of a massive invasion by Nazi Germany in 1941. And he fails to mention the Chinese assisting in the anti-imperialist and national liberation struggles of Korea and Vietnam, even as there were major problems in handling the relation between defending the socialist state and promoting the world revolution.<sup>59</sup>

These are but a slice of the sweeping, fundamental, and multi-faceted changes—in the production and social relations, in the political relations, both within the country and

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59. Avakian has criticized the error of Stalin—an error which persisted with Mao, though to a lesser degree—to equate the defense of the socialist state with the advance of the world revolution, rather than recognizing that there is in fact a contradiction between the defense of the socialist state and the advance of the world revolution. To correctly handle this contradiction, Avakian has emphasized the need for the socialist state to put the advance of the world revolution above everything, including the advance of the revolution in the particular country. Avakian has developed the orientation of building the socialist state as, above all, a base area for the world revolution. See *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*, published as issue No. 50 of *Revolution* magazine, December 1981, and “Advancing the World Revolution: Questions of Strategic Orientation,” originally published in *Revolution* magazine, Spring 1984, both available online at [revcom.us](http://revcom.us).

internationally, and in the world of ideology and culture—that radically differentiated socialist societies from previously existing exploitative societies.

Yes, these inspiring achievements existed in dialectical relation to real and at times serious (if still secondary) shortcomings in these first socialist states. But Badiou’s summation cannot comprehend what was so pathbreaking about these revolutions nor the actual problems in understanding and methodology that led to mistakes and weaknesses—which, though secondary, were not insignificant. (This can only be touched on here, and the reader is encouraged to delve into readings that are cited here, especially “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity.”<sup>60</sup>)

The great achievements of the first wave of socialist revolution, especially what was achieved through the Cultural Revolution in China (the topic of Chapter 4), are the highest peaks yet reached by humanity. We can neither rest there nor put them behind us: the great breakthroughs of the first wave must be recast into a more advanced conception.

Was state power worth it? Yes, definitely.

Is it worth striving again for state power? Yes, absolutely.

Must we, and can we, do better and go further? Yes, once again.

### ***Badiou’s Classless and Formalist View of the State***

But Alain Badiou has ruled out the seizure of power and the revolutionary transformation of society through the instrument of a new state under proletarian leadership and control as neither possible nor desirable. Now we meet Alain Badiou traveling on his other theoretical track. Not the Badiou who refers to and even seems to situate his argument with a phrase of Marx or a

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60. Bob Avakian, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” *Revolution and Communism: A Foundation and Strategic Orientation*, revcom.us.

In “Making Revolution And Emancipating Humanity,” Part One, Avakian notes several main areas of shortcomings, including:

- A tendency towards positivism and reductionism—towards flattening out contradictions and applying a mechanical approach, including in the manner of treating the superstructure as too closely linked to the goal of economic transformation at any given time, linking things in the superstructure too closely to the immediate tasks at hand, particularly with regard to the economic base.
- A tendency towards the reification of the proletariat, as already discussed in the chapter on class, and towards viewing things in such a way that whether or not someone is a proletarian is a crucial factor in determining whether or not that someone has truth in their hands, so to speak.
- A reification of socialism itself in a certain sense—viewing socialism as a static thing and more or less an end in itself, rather than its being understood as a very dynamic process and a transition to communism, leading to some mishandling of the relation between goal and process, so that whatever was happening at a given time became or tended to be identified with the goal itself, rather than being understood as part of a process toward a larger goal. Along with this was a constriction of the relation between the necessary main direction, in fundamental terms, and what were objectively “detours” or departures from that main direction but which were seen and treated as dangerous deviations from—that main direction. This led, to a certain degree, and sometimes to a considerable degree, to a stifling of creativity, individual initiative, and individual rights in the overall process.

concept of Marxism, but the Alain Badiou for whom Marxism is “no longer of practical use,” and for whom the state *qua* state (the state as such) is the problem. In *The Century*, he writes:

Whereas the state has always been the alpha and omega of the fascist vision of politics—as a state propped up by the supposed existence of great closed collectives—in the history of Leninism, and later of Maoism, it has never been anything but the obstacle that the brutal finitude of the operations of power opposes to the infinite mobility of politics.<sup>61</sup>

Badiou is making two global claims. The first is that the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat has shown this state form to be an “obstacle” to an unfettered politics (the content of which Badiou is rather vague about). The second, and closely related, claim is that the proletarian state is subject to some supposed non-class logic of the “operations of power,” a “brutal finitude” of structure and purpose (and “brutal” is meant both literally and figuratively) ranged against a politics which drive towards open-endedness (again with no class content, or really much content at all, specified). The dichotomy is not one of class division and class antagonism cutting through and shaping all of society, but an intrinsic structure and logic of the state versus society.

Now, in socialist society there is indeed a contradiction between the state and the individual. This state, even as a radically new type of state, is a specialized institution with a concentration of powers—precisely to serve the goal of suppressing counterrevolution, backing the masses in the struggle to change the world, and advancing the world revolution. But this concentration of powers, interacting with the force of habit in socialist society (people counting on others to take care of things, going with the flow, bowing to authority, etc.) carries with it certain significant contradictions.

In socialist society, mechanisms of the state can be deployed against individuals and collectivities in society. Mao called attention to the contradiction between the individual and the state in socialist society, and Avakian has made further advances in conceptualizing this problem and its solutions, including the need for socialist society to establish “rules of the game” for the functioning of the state in the form of a constitution, and laws based on that constitution, which stipulate rights and procedures and protect individual rights. The contradiction becomes especially acute in instances when revisionist-capitalist forces usurp control of portions of state power, even while the society overall remains socialist and the state, in its principal aspect, continues to reflect and serve the socialist character of society. But all of this has objective class content. The essential question is: a state for whom, a state for what, a state that is, increasingly, being mastered by the masses and revolutionized through the continuing class struggle, one in which contradictions are increasingly recognized and the means and methods of resolution discovered and mastered in the interests of the masses and in the direction towards communism—or not?

Alain Badiou’s method, on the other hand, is formalism: the state as a structure unto itself. It is a classless view of the state; and by his criteria the differences between the socialist and capitalist

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61. Badiou, *The Century*, p. 103.

states are secondary to what is common between them. In *Being and Event*, he develops this position (in the following he is using “state” in both its political sense and in his philosophical way):

This is because even if the route of political change—and I mean the route of radical dispensation of justice—is always bordered by the State, it cannot in any way let itself be guided by the latter, *for the State is precisely non-political, insofar as it cannot change, save hands, and it is well known that there is little strategic signification in such a change...* No doubt politics itself must originate in the very same place as the state: in that dialectic. But *this is certainly not in order to seize the State nor to double the State’s effect.*<sup>62</sup> [emphasis ours]

For Badiou, the state is an oppressive instrument as such, a weight on the masses, regardless of whose hands it is in, and it cannot be used for emancipation—again, as Badiou puts it, “certainly not in order to seize the State nor to double the State’s effect.”

What Badiou masks in his notion that there is no “strategic signification” in the “change of hands” of the state is the reality that there is a *class content* to the state; it is an instrument and form of *class rule*, serving and reinforcing underlying production relations. As Lenin stated bluntly, “*The state is nothing but a machine for the suppression of one class by another.* [emphasis ours]”<sup>63</sup> The state is historically evolved and *appears* to stand above society, but is in essence a product and manifestation of irreconcilable class antagonisms and serves the function of keeping conflict within the bounds of “order” favorable to the maintenance of class domination. The dictatorship of the proletariat is a radically different type of state, carrying forward the socialist transition—but it is still an instrument of class domination, even as it aims to put an end to all class domination, to all class distinctions, and to all states.

In his writings, Badiou recognizes that different states give advantage to different groupings or “collective subsets”—and this gives a continuing Marxist patina to his political analysis. But since the groupings may or *may not* be classes, he does not conceive the nature of the state in its fundamental and defining terms: that of class, and class antagonism.

Little “strategic signification in such change?” What about a state and society that, instead of enforcing the right to exploit labor and accumulate capital, forbids it?

By rejecting the concept of class, Alain Badiou blurs the fundamental distinction between the capitalist state and the socialist state, drawing strictly formalist similarities between the two. But the bigger implication of his argument about the state is that it papers over the need for state power and new economic relations. He is laying the groundwork for his political argument, and the explicit conclusion, that we need a “politics for which state power is neither the objective nor the norm.”

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62. Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 110.

63. V.I. Lenin, “Proletarian Revolution and the Renegade Kautsky,” p. 260.

In fact, socialist state power, the dictatorship of the proletariat, is a very good thing—and, yes, with tremendous “strategic signification” in the “change of hands.” As Bob Avakian has put it:

It is **right** to want state power. It is **necessary** to want state power. State power is a **good** thing—state power is a **great** thing—in the hands of the right people, the right class, in the service of the right things: bringing about an end to exploitation, oppression, and social inequality and bringing into being a world, a communist world, in which human beings can flourish in new and greater ways than ever before.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Party in Socialist Society: “Ill-Adapted” or a Tool of Liberation?**

Alain Badiou sees his work as part of a larger project of bringing “the communist hypothesis into existence in a different modality from that of the previous one.”<sup>65</sup> The previous modality to which Badiou refers is that of the conquest of power (a revolutionary insurrectional politics) and the construction of a new state power led by a communist party (the “party-state framework”).

Here we interrogate Badiou’s theses about the communist party as a party in power. We contrast this with the communist understanding of a) the need for an institutionalized leading role for the vanguard under socialism, b) the contradictions bound up with this, and c) how and through what means socialist society must be moving in the direction of the eventual elimination of institutionalized communist leadership—as part of creating the necessary conditions for world communist society.

Let’s return to Badiou’s core assertion about the vanguard party:

The party had been an appropriate tool for the overthrow of weakened reactionary regimes, but it proved ill-adapted for the construction of ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ in the sense that Marx had intended—that is, a temporary state, organizing the transition to the non-state: its dialectical ‘withering away.’<sup>66</sup>

Social-democratic and anti-communist commentators have often argued the “ill-adaptation” case: a communist party that had been waging struggle under difficult conditions of repression, putting a premium on discipline to mobilize for insurrection against authoritarian regimes and conditioned to distrust openness, becomes hardened and sclerotic as a ruling party. Badiou’s (ever-so slight) variation on this coinage is that such a party, invariably preoccupied with holding on to power, finds itself expanding coercive state-party power, when it should be drawing down state function.

Badiou’s summation is that after the defeat of the Paris Commune, the dominant question for the communist movement was:

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64. Avakian, *Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom*, revcom.us.

65. Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, p. 115.

66. Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” p. 36.

How to hold out—unlike the Paris Commune—against the armed reaction of the possessing classes; how to organize the new power so as to protect it against the onslaught of its enemies?... The obsession with victory, centered around questions of organization, found its principal expression in the ‘iron discipline’ of the communist party—the characteristic construction of the second sequence.<sup>67</sup> [By which Badiou means principally the revolutions in the Soviet Union and China].

This is a remarkable passage. One is immediately compelled to pose an elementary question to Alain Badiou: in a world in which horror upon horror is piled on humanity, in a world in which the oppressed and exploited have rebelled and protested only to be put back down, often with the most gruesome violence, in a world in which the communards of Paris were slaughtered and defeated, in large part because they did not have leadership and organization and an ideology to guide a struggle for all-the-way emancipation—what is wrong with wanting victory and wanting to safeguard victory in order to do nothing less than to free humanity? Have there been problems and mistakes in sustaining socialist societies “against the onslaught of its enemies”? Yes, and even serious ones. But the answer is not to hand power over to the enemy, or to forgo the struggle for power. The point is how we can do better—at winning both in the immediate sense, and in a way consistent with the longer-term objectives and values of a truly communist society.

Let’s further parse Badiou’s distortion of the essence of a communist vanguard. Badiou elevates discipline and organization above the ideological core that makes a communist party ... a communist party. A vanguard party is defined by its ideology and by the class interests it concentrates. Another way to put it: a vanguard party is defined by its line (its world outlook and method and the policies and orientation that flow from that). Organization and discipline serve and reflect that ideology—communism—and are guided by that ideology; they serve the class struggle; they serve the dialectic of theory and practice, the spiral of knowledge of a communist party, so that it can lead the masses to understand and change the world, to make revolution in a society divided into classes.

But line counts for naught in the formalist frame adopted by Badiou.<sup>68</sup> The Chinese Communist Party under Mao’s leadership was highly organized and disciplined, but Mao emphasized that political and ideological line is decisive. Did it make a difference that Deng Xiaoping fought within that party for a line of capitalist development, and that Mao fought for another line—one of continuing the revolution under the dictatorship of the proletariat, towards the goal of communism? Did it, and does it, make a difference in Chinese society between 1949 and 1976 ... and in Chinese society today? Or are both Mao and Deng cousins of party bureaucracy?

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67. Ibid.

68. It is revealing (and frankly astonishing for someone who lays claim to have been a Maoist at one time) that in his essay “The Communist Hypothesis,” Badiou matter-of-factly blends and homogenizes the Soviet Union and China, when they were genuinely socialist societies, with Czechoslovakia, Cuba, and North Vietnam, which never were socialist societies. In Cuba, Fidel Castro put commodity relations in command of planning, organizing economic development around the sugar economy and its international linkages. But in the formalist mind-set none of this matters—all of these societies are sub-species of the “party-state paradigm.”

The discipline of the vanguard exists in dialectical unity with struggle over line within the party. The organizational principles first developed by Lenin combine, in the words of an RCP resolution, “On Leaders and Leadership,” “a high degree of individual input and initiative (from individuals and from units of the Party on all levels) with a high degree of unity of will and action and enables us to fight the enemy in an organized and disciplined way. It makes possible the functioning of the Party’s chain of knowledge and of command in a way that links the Party with the masses to lead them in fighting for their revolutionary interests.”<sup>69</sup> And, in the words of the RCP’s new (2008) *Constitution*:

The entire party is welded together as a chain of knowledge and chain of command on the basis of democratic centralism....

Both aspects of democratic centralism—the wrangling over line and its unified implementation—are essential to the whole process of knowing and changing the world on the most correct and profound possible basis. The principles of democratic centralism enable the party collectively to not only draw from, and to synthesize, on a scientific basis, the ideas of comrades in the party...but also to learn from the thinking of masses of people outside the party, and to develop and strengthen its ties with them, as an important part of carrying forward the dialectical process of deepening its understanding of reality in interrelation with its ability to lead masses of people to transform reality in a revolutionary way, toward the goal of communism.”<sup>70</sup>

In capitalist society, a communist party must be preparing the ground for revolution, for the revolutionary seizure of power. It must, as a decisive element of its work, be raising the political and ideological consciousness of the masses who are subjected to the constant bombardment of bourgeois ideas. It brings communist ideology to the masses—combating the influences of bourgeois ideology within the proletariat and broader sections of society, and the pulls of spontaneity and the force of habit. It brings a vision of socialism and communism to the masses and trains the masses in a scientific understanding of the workings of reality and specifically of society and the interrelations of different classes and social strata.

In the context of a society ruled by exploiting classes, and through the ongoing operation of such a society, the masses are denied this understanding. In class society, it is only a small minority (intellectuals) who are trained and who develop the facility to be able to work in the realm of ideas. Which is to say: the need for a communist party arises out of the class contradictions of capitalist society intermeshed with the division between mental and manual labor. And without such a party there is absolutely no possibility of overthrowing the system of class rule, and class exploitation, that perpetuates such oppressive divisions.

But what about socialist society? Why is a party needed in a society in which the masses are now no longer kept down and prevented from significantly participating in the essential spheres of

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69. “Resolution: On Leaders and Leadership,” RCP, USA, revcom.us.

70. *Constitution of the Revolutionary Communist Party* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2008), p. 17.



decision-making and intellectual activity? Certainly, the process of making revolution and seizing power brings about immense changes. The repressive force and oppressive weight of the bourgeois state is shattered. A new state with new aims gives backing to the masses to remake the world. Moreover, in making revolution and seizing power, people do undergo great change—overcoming divisions, finding new strength in collectivity, and taking up new radical and communist ideas.

But in a fundamental sense, the process of revolutionary transformation is just beginning with the seizure of power. It is why revolution needs to be made: only with and on the basis of seizing power does it become possible to radically change society and the thinking of the people. Indeed, the tasks of carrying the revolution forward are now even more complex and more challenging than what is involved with the initial seizure of state power. These tasks will not take care of themselves; they will not simply be sorted out by unmediated popular consensus.

Why not? Here we have to consider the physiognomy of socialist society. With all the great changes that a revolution ushers in, the great majority of people in socialist society, even for some time after the seizure of power, will not be revolutionary communists. In the early stages of socialism, there will be a relatively small solid core fully committed to the objectives, goals, and methods of communism. In addition, the gaps between mental and manual labor—including between those who have been trained in various spheres of science and of administration, as well as in fields such as engineering and other technical domains, etc., and those who have been locked out of such training—will remain on the “day after the revolution.” And even as immediate steps are taken towards overcoming that gap, with the formerly oppressed and exploited beginning to enter into the realm of working with ideas in ways unimaginable under capitalism, this will be a protracted struggle throughout the socialist period.

This gets back to the overarching fact that socialist society is still a society divided into classes. New bourgeois forces will emerge out of the very same material and ideological conditions that must be transformed under socialism and, owing to the very contradictions and dynamics marking and driving socialist society, these forces will find concentrated expression at the top reaches of the party and state, and will seek to steer society down another road, back towards capitalism. These programs and outlooks opposed to the revolutionary transformation of society will not be “transparently bourgeois.” It is instructive to recall that in revolutionary China, the “capitalist roaders” during the socialist period did not announce themselves as advocates of capitalism but rather stood on platforms for a more “efficient,” a more “rational,” and “living-standards-based” socialism.

What makes this extremely complicated and acute is the fact that the major contradictions of socialist society get concentrated in the party itself—as the party in power with disproportionate authority and responsibility for leading the process of resolving the contradictions of socialist society in the direction of communism. The relationship of the party to society changes once a new socialist state, led by the communist party, is established. As the party in power, it can be turned into its opposite. The party, and with it the state framework, can be taken over by a new bourgeoisie and, again—for reasons having to do with the very nature of socialist society as a transition to, but not yet, communism, a society still marked by class division, existing in a world still dominated, for a relatively long period of time, by powerful imperialist states—this new

bourgeoisie will find its most concentrated expression within the communist party itself, among those party leaders who adopt a bourgeois world outlook and take to the “capitalist road,” as Mao so insightfully and scientifically summed up.

There is no simple solution to this. It is a problem and danger flowing from material and social reality; it is not “caused” by communists “obsessed with power.” This is the real-life “dialectics” of the matter, which Alain Badiou cannot grasp.

The danger under socialism—and this will be addressed more thoroughly in the discussion of the Cultural Revolution—is that *bourgeois* authority (capitalist roaders) within leadership structures can seize power and turn these structures into a bourgeois authoritarian instrument of capitalist restoration—even in the name of the masses and of communism. This is why the revolution must continue under socialism, both to beat back these attempts and to further transform the structures of state and society. This understanding and the struggle flowing from it, reaching its highest point so far in the Cultural Revolution in China, marks a qualitative development in the theory and practice of the “party-state” paradigm.

Alain Badiou often invokes the masses’ “capacity for truth”<sup>71</sup> for his “politics without party.” Here is the contradiction. Socialist society must rely on the masses. The advance to communism must be the conscious undertaking of the masses of people making up the great majority of society; and a radically different kind of state empowers the masses. But what the experience of revolutionary struggle throughout the world and of socialist society has also shown is that it is not possible to rely on the spontaneity of the masses, to simply “go with the flow” of where the masses are at, to simply “trust” in the masses “as they are.” The masses are pulled in contradictory directions, even in socialist society. It is a matter of fundamental principle and strategic orientation to rely on the masses, but this requires ideological work and struggle; it is about mobilizing their *conscious* activism.<sup>72</sup>

Given this social physiognomy, given the persistence of such things as commodity relations and the gap between mental and manual labor, given the still deeply entrenched influence of traditional ideas and values in socialist society, a vanguard is still needed—is indeed indispensable for the masses to continue on the road of emancipation, toward the final goal of communism. A vanguard must still bring scientific understanding to the masses; train the masses in the scientific outlook of communism; and continue to raise the sights of people to the big issues of society and the world. The vanguard in power must be learning while leading—precisely to deepen its grasp of the world and the decisive contradictions influencing the development of things, not only in a particular country but in the world overall, and its ability to enable the masses to more and more consciously carry out the radical transformation of economic, social, and political relations and institutions, and of their own modes of thinking. Such leadership is needed to identify the most crucial questions facing society and to lead overall

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71. Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 54.

72. See Bob Avakian, *Ruminations and Wranglings: On the Importance of Marxist Materialism, Communism as a Science, Meaningful Revolutionary Work, and a Life with Meaning* (revcom.us) and particularly the section “Relying on the masses, but not on spontaneity, even in socialist society” for more discussion of this point.

in establishing the best possible terms of debate and struggle, in the whole swirl and ferment that will mark socialist society.

In sum, in socialist society it will remain the case, for a long period of time, that relatively small groupings of people, representing different and opposed class interests, will be exerting disproportionate influence. The question is not whether there will or will not be leadership in socialist society—that there will be one kind of leadership or another is certain and is rooted in objective reality, in the real contradictions that continue to mark society—but rather what kind of leadership, serving what goals and aims, guided by what principles? And this gets concentrated in the decisive contest under socialism: whether society will move forward along the socialist road towards communism, or back on the road to capitalism. For all these reasons, far from being “ill-adapted” to lead the new society, the party is the most essential organization in this whole transition; and its role must be institutionalized in a way that reflects that, and serves the continued advance to communism.

To be clear: how to maintain the party as a *revolutionary* party, as a *genuine communist* party, is a major question, one that Mao in particular grappled deeply with, as we shall see in the chapter on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, and one that animates much of the new synthesis brought forward by Bob Avakian. Alain Badiou—and in this he is hardly unique or original—can certainly point to problems and difficulties in the socialist transition, including contradictions bound up with specialized responsibilities of leadership. There were mistakes and shortcomings, some quite serious, in the first wave of socialist revolution. But without a party, you don’t have a chance of correctly identifying and acting on these problems. Avakian, grappling with precisely this contradiction, has further conceptualized the role of the party in socialist society:

The party in socialist society must act as the vanguard not only in terms of being a party in power but *also* in terms of actively involving itself in and leading—actually unleashing and winning leadership of—mass struggle in opposition to those aspects of the *status quo* which at any given time have become obstacles to the further revolutionization of society, which stand in opposition to the new revolutionary forces being brought forward. In short, [it must] be a party in power *and* a vanguard of revolutionary struggle against any parts of power that are blocking the road to complete liberation.<sup>73</sup> [emphasis in original]

### ***Once Again on Rousseau and Representation***

Alain Badiou’s views on the state, the party, and on the party-state paradigm find their roots in Rousseau’s view of a “general will” that cannot be mediated or represented, and that must be directly expressed. Badiou in a meditation on Rousseau:

...Rousseau rigorously proves that general will cannot be represented, not even by the State:... It frees politics from the state.... It resides entirely in the ‘collective being’ of its citizen-militants....

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73. Bob Avakian, “The End of A Stage—The Beginning of New Stage,” “A Final Note,” *Revolution*, Fall 1990, p. 46.

...Rousseau's hostility to parties and factions—and thus to any form of parliamentary representativity—is deduced from the generic character of politics.... it is ruled out that politics be realizable in the election of representatives since 'will does not admit of being represented.'<sup>74</sup>

Elsewhere, Badiou states:

... [T]he politics of emancipation can no longer work under the paradigm of revolution [state power – ed.] nor remain prisoner to the party-form. Symmetrically it cannot be inscribed in the parliamentary and electoral apparatus.<sup>75</sup>

We will not rehearse here the arguments about the “general will.” What is pertinent in these statements is that Badiou proceeds to make another formalist move: to equate the bourgeois-democratic “parliamentary and electoral apparatus” with the revolutionary “party-state” form, as by his criteria both make claims to “representativity” of will. Again, this formalism masks the radical differences in underlying class content between the socialist state and capitalist state. Further, with respect to a communist party and its relationship to the masses, he misses the essence of what a vanguard concentrates and represents in its line.

In class society, unmediated or unrepresented politics, without states or parties, is in fact impossible. In an idealized Rousseau-land of formalist constructs, one can fantasize in such a way—but in this real world, class society is anything but free, or unmediated, of states or parties. The question is the content of such states and parties: do they serve to preserve and reinforce exploitative production relations, oppressive social relations, and traditional ideas—and yes, along with that, classes, states, and parties—or do they serve to unleash the masses to transform society in a direction towards getting beyond all class and social divisions and, yes, along with that, states and parties?

Badiou faults the bourgeois party-electoral process for trying to do the impossible: to represent a “general will” when, in fact, according to Rousseau, there can be no representation of such will. Badiou agrees with Rousseau that mediation and representation distort the individual wills that comprise the “general will.” It is on this basis, of the distorting effects of mediation, that Alain Badiou finds “parliamentary parties” fatally flawed. But the reality is different. While bourgeois parties claim to be representing, or responding to, individual wills, to the preferences of individual voters (and blocs of such voters), etc., they in fact represent the interests of a *class* (the bourgeoisie) that stands in fundamental antagonistic opposition to another class (the proletariat).

What about communist leadership? To begin with, it is not a matter of representing a general will of a society—this cannot be done in a society divided into classes. But neither is communist leadership a question of “representation” of the “will of the masses,” as that spontaneously

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74. Badiou, *Being and Event*, pp. 347-48.

75. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 518.

presents itself at any given time. The essence of communist leadership is ideological and political line. The vanguard role of a communist party is to “represent” the highest interests and fundamental needs of the masses—to achieve communism—not the temporal political mood or inclinations of this or that section of workers or other strata in society (although a party taking responsibility for leading society forward towards communism must have a deep understanding of the “social configuration” and class composition of society and the moods of different sections of the people at any given time, and the party’s specific policies at any given time must take all this into account).

Without the party, the highest interests of the proletariat, as concentrated in ideological and political line, and reflecting the science, revolutionary political movement, and goal of communism, will not be “represented,” that is, they will not become a material and ideological force in the world. Without the party, the highest interests of the proletariat will, in fact, be sacrificed. These interests must, and can only, find concentrated expression in the party’s ideological and political line, reflecting and giving living expression to the science, revolutionary political movement, and goal of communism.

Every class other than the proletariat has spontaneity—traditional thinking and ideas and the weight of the economic and social relations in society—on its side. The revolutionary interests of the proletariat, by contrast, cannot be realized by relying on spontaneity. But the answer to spontaneity is not for communist leadership to try to rely on compulsion in the name of combating spontaneity. No, the orientation has to be that of unleashing a process around the unresolved contradictions of socialism, as a propulsive force in socialist society—and, yes, giving leadership to this—summing up and giving direction, learning while leading, and working to break down the division between leaders and led.

There is a definite logic—and once again especially for certain strata in society, in particular radicalized sections of the petite bourgeoisie, there is a certain lure—to Alain Badiou’s attack on the vanguard party (it is “of no practical use to us”). His politics of equality, even its most “radical” and self-described “emancipatory” incarnations, can and do find spontaneous expression in the gravitational force-field of bourgeois-democratic society. The reason is that bourgeois democracy is structured around principles of formal equality. This in turn corresponds to and is reinforced by bourgeois society’s economic substrate of commodity production, which is governed by exchange of equivalents (commodities exchanging at their value). But Badiou’s arguments have nothing to do with—or, more precisely, lead away from—the radical transformation of society, to rid the world of relations of exploitation and oppression, and all their horrendous consequences, and to bring about a true emancipation of humanity.

### ***“Classless Bureaucratic Submission,” or Again, Is Line Decisive?***

In *Metapolitics*, Alain Badiou poses his meta-question:

...[W]e must ask the question that, without a doubt, constitutes the great enigma of the century: why does the subsumption of politics, either through the form of

the immediate bond (the masses) or the mediate bond (the party), ultimately give rise to bureaucratic submission and the cult of the state?<sup>76</sup>

Wrapped up in this question, or rather this contrived thesis, are many core tenets of “anti-totalitarian theory” (this despite Badiou’s repeated disavowals). There is a series of operative assumptions: that taking the responsibility for leading and running a proletarian state—and in that context, unleashing the masses, under the leadership of a party—leads to the rule of a (classless) bureaucracy and the forcible imposition of its will. Let’s unwrap some of this, starting with the issue of bureaucracy.

The idea that the masses could directly exercise their political authority without communist vanguard leadership, without the “the party-state” (or, more properly, the socialist state within which the party plays an institutionalized leading role), flies in the face of the actual contradictions and the social-ideological development of the socialist societies that have existed, and what will be faced in the socialist societies that come into being in the future.

The very complexity of capitalist but also socialist society imposes a highly developed division of labor. There are specialized leadership-administration responsibilities in socialist society that place disproportionate authority in the hands of political leaders. Science, technology, and other fields require a high degree of specialization and advanced knowledge. Here we find expressions of class-divided society, including where differences between mental and manual labor, town and country, workers and peasants, men and women, etc., still exist and continue to form the basis of class distinction.

In communist society, there will be differentiation of tasks, but no longer will this be fixed and socially encoded, and no longer will it involve the enslaving subordination of the individual to any division of labor; there will, rather, be the conscious sharing in the multiplicity of tasks, which itself will be highly fluid.

In socialist society, the question is not in essence whether there will be cadres, leaders, managers, etc. This is a reality that socialist society inherits. Suppose you sent every last official and administrator packing? It would very quickly be necessary to beg them back or find others who could take their place, playing the same essential role, because a complex and interdependent socialist economy and society require leadership, coordination, and varying levels of specialization.

So does socialist society simply accommodate itself to the existing social division of labor? No. It must be working actively, and radically, to transform the social division of labor.

The decisive question is line—what line is leading at all levels of society, especially at the highest levels. Is administration in planning, is leadership in education, and in other spheres and in individual units serving the all-around transformation of society towards communism, or are methods that smack of class society and even class oppression being resorted to and relied upon?

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76. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 70.

This is not a given; it must be the object of mass debate, struggle, and ongoing social interrogation.

There is, at the same time, a crucial question of remolding administrative strata and waging ideological struggle with the aim of winning them to remain on the socialist road, overall and specifically in their role within the state apparatus, while at the same time fighting to prevent the transformation of this same apparatus into one serving the dictatorship of a new bourgeoisie. This is why, while targeting a relative handful of capitalist roaders, the Cultural Revolution was also a tremendous school of education, as well as class struggle, a fiery test not only for the masses but especially for the party and administrators at all levels.

Yet and still, the social division of labor cannot be frozen. On the basis of a revolutionary line, socialist society must also move to restrict the differences between leadership and led, between mental and manual labor, between professional and nonprofessional, and other such contradictions, to the greatest degree possible at any given stage of social-economic development.

There are, at any given time, material and ideological constraints to how far you can go in reducing gaps in skill and function. But you have to be pushing against those limits. This will involve new collective forms, and will involve experimentation with new social-institutional arrangements, towards breaking down the lingering hierarchy of occupational and administrative specialization. This was one of the hallmarks of the Cultural Revolution, an orientation with real-world ramifications, about which Badiou has very little to say. The Cultural Revolution also demonstrated that this is a question of class struggle. Big transformations in Chinese society took place as a result of the struggle against the capitalist roaders at the top levels of the party. (Badiou can only muster a glancing and perfunctory reference to the policy of combining political leadership, including from among the masses, with specialists—or what was called “red and expert” and “nonprofessionals leading professionals.”)

In communist society, the tasks of administering and governing society, and the capability for doing so, become part of the collective responsibility and capacity of the individuals making up society. The tasks of administration will no longer embody class antagonism or the social inequality of specialization. In the socialist transition, the role, and challenge, for vanguard leadership is to find the means, through development of policy and through giving overall direction to revolutionary struggle—leading while learning, and learning while leading—to continue the advance towards the abolition of such class antagonism and social inequality, through the long-term process of struggle that will be required to transform the material and ideological conditions in which these antagonisms and inequalities are grounded and which, so long as these conditions persist and have not yet been uprooted, will tend to regenerate these antagonisms and inequalities.

### ***Institutionalized Communist Leadership, the Leadership-Led Contradiction—and a New Synthesis on This***

We have been theoretically arguing and showing, with historical examples, the decisive, and indeed indispensable, role a vanguard party plays, and must play. When led by a revolutionary

communist line, the party and the socialist state are precious instruments for emancipation, indeed the *necessary* means for moving society beyond the “4 Alls,” to where it is no longer necessary to have such institutionalized leadership. Such a party is, fundamentally, a liberating instrument all the way through this process, with all the twists and turns that will inevitably be involved.

Yet there is a world-historic contradiction concentrated here, one that Alain Badiou fails to recognize, having rejected the “party-state paradigm” and the real contradictions bound up with the socialist transition and the means of getting beyond the “4 Alls.”

Badiou fails to see the unity between the so-called “party-state”—the dictatorship of the proletariat led by the vanguard communist party—and the liberatory and emancipatory process it unleashes. He sees the disproportionate authority of the party as being in absolute opposition to mass initiative, rather than understanding the actual dialectical relation involved and the way in which—on the basis of a correct line, and so long as it is characterized by such a correct line—the party will much more serve to unleash, rather than to suppress, the initiative of the masses.

We need to step back. It is the case that, since their historical emergence, all states, including the proletarian state, have been led by a small group of people, relative to the population as a whole (and even relative to the class whose interests the state fundamentally serves). All state systems in exploitative class society have served the interests of a dominant class that was a minority of society. And all political systems in class society institutionalize ruling class leadership in one way or another.

The difference under socialism is that the minority leading the dictatorship of the proletariat stands in a qualitatively different relationship to society. Unlike the situation in all previous forms of state, this leadership concentrates and upholds the interests not of an exploiting minority but of the vast majority of world humanity. It seeks to lead and unleash the masses to administer this state and master society—and to wage struggles and carry forward transformations so that this state is indeed a radically different type of state. And this “modality” of leadership aims to overcome the material and ideological conditions calling forth both a state and the need for institutionalized communist leadership.

But there is this contradiction in socialist society: the state is not, in any direct or “unmediated” sense, in the hands of the majority of society. The masses exercise power in socialist society both *indirectly*, through the role of leaders and representatives from various mass organizations; and increasingly, through the forward motion and development of socialist society, *directly*, in gaining the capability to take ever greater responsibility for the direction of society and for administering society in all spheres.

Still, the contradiction between leadership and led continues deep into socialist society. This world historic contradiction requires, as discussed earlier with respect to the socialist state and its “withering away,” a dialectical approach towards its resolution. It requires further scientific inquiry and summation in order to develop still better methods for handling and resolving this contradiction—to overcome, step-by-step and in waves, the contradiction between the vanguard and the broad masses.



Avakian has been taking up this challenge. He has, as discussed earlier, put forward the need for the party in socialist society to both wield power *and* “be a vanguard of revolutionary struggle against any parts of power that are blocking the road to complete liberation.” He has also put forward the formulation “solid core with a lot of elasticity” to describe the orientation of the party in the future socialist society. This “solid core/elasticity” relation bears both on the kind of society socialism must be and on the contradiction between leadership and led.

Avakian has conceptualized a certain approach. First, there must be a solid core of leadership. This solid core must firmly grasp the fundamental and final goal of the revolution, the achievement of communism, throughout the world, and must hold firmly onto the reins of power against imperialist pressure and capitalist elements arising within socialist society—including within the party itself, where these elements will seek to form headquarters and struggle for power at leading levels—and it must maintain the new state power as a *socialist* state power in transition to communist society. Second, this leadership must expand the solid core to the greatest degree possible at any given time. Third, it must be consistently working towards the realization of the conditions where such a solid core will no longer be necessary. And, fourth, it must give expression to the greatest degree of elasticity at any given time.<sup>77</sup>

This last point (elasticity to the greatest degree possible at any given time) emphasizes again that what is being envisioned is not simply more debate and dissent on a more or less “linear” basis—as a more or less direct extension of the party’s line and policies at any given point—but a much more complex process, involving much greater initiative on the part of growing numbers of the masses, in relation to which the party must strive to play its vanguard role and win growing numbers of the masses to become more conscious of the need for, and to struggle more consciously for, the objectives of the communist revolution. Socialism assuredly cannot be some single “line of march” forward but must involve people going, and feeling they can go, in all kinds of creative and diverse directions; it must involve dissent and contestation raging over the big issues of society and the world; it must involve the continual deepening of understanding of goals and methods of communist revolution, the continual interrogation of society and its leadership in all spheres and all institutions and structures.

The task of leadership is not to “manage” this but to give overall direction in accordance with its communist outlook and objectives. Through the development of this overall process, the solid core will be expanding. The more far-reaching and probing and experimental this process is, the greater the risks of losing power. But without actively seeking to go to that “brink of being drawn and quartered,” as Avakian has put it, you will not be changing society in the ways it must be changed, the masses of people will not be gaining the knowledge and understanding they must, and they will not be able to increasingly develop the ability to rule and transform society, in the direction of communism—and to finally overcome the contradictions and conditions that underlie and give rise to the need for institutionalized vanguard leadership.

This is an orientation not just for leadership. It is an approach that masses of people must be grappling with in socialist society, and even before that—in the course of developing the mass

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77. See Avakian, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” p. 36.

revolutionary struggle that will lead to the overthrow of capitalism—growing numbers of people must be grappling with this, as a crucial part of preparing for and fitting themselves to rule and revolutionize society, once power has been seized.

Contrary to the arguments of Alain Badiou, the “party-state” framework—the dictatorship of the proletariat, led by its vanguard party—is an essential tool for the liberation of the exploited and oppressed masses, and ultimately for the emancipation of humanity as a whole from relations of exploitation and oppression. A scientific—a materialist and dialectical, as opposed to an idealist and ahistorical—summation of historical experience, including the historical experience of socialist society itself, profoundly underscores this fundamental truth. But this framework has also undergone qualitative development. A new stage of communist revolution demands this.

## CHAPTER IV: REREADING THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN ORDER TO BURY THE CULTURAL REVOLUTION

### Introduction

In discussions about Alain Badiou, it is often suggested that, whatever disagreements one might have with him, he is at least stimulating serious discussion of the Cultural Revolution. And at a time when communism is so widely reviled, how could this not be a good thing?

Certainly, much of Badiou's reputation derives from his ongoing reference to the Maoist movement in the world during the 1960s and 1970s and his apparent refusal to back away from identifying with and supporting the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR). "I am there, I am still there," writes Badiou, evoking the poet Rimbaud who took part in the Paris Commune.<sup>78</sup> A seemingly rare and audacious stance.

Actually, what sets Alain Badiou apart from most contemporary commentators on the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution is this: *where most of them distort the Cultural Revolution in order to attack it, Badiou ends up distorting it in order to embrace something else*. Or better put, Badiou embraces aspects and features of the Cultural Revolution isolated from its actual context and placed into a different, and in fact opposing, world view from that of the goals and viewpoint of Mao Tsetung, the revolutionaries in China, and tens of millions who actively took part in the Cultural Revolution with an unprecedented level of consciousness.

The high-water mark of the "first wave" of proletarian revolution, of the historical experience of the dictatorship of the proletariat, was the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (GPCR) of 1966-1976. Mao's theoretical analysis underlying the GPCR:

[C]leared up a great deal of confusion as to whether, and why, there was a danger of capitalist restoration in socialist society, and which provided fundamental guidance in mobilizing masses to advance on the socialist road in opposition to revisionist forces whose orientation and actions were leading precisely towards such a capitalist restoration. The Cultural Revolution in China was the living embodiment of such mass revolutionary mobilization, in which tens and hundreds of millions of people debated and struggled over questions bearing decisively on the direction of society and the world revolution. For ten years, this mass upsurge succeeded in holding back, and putting on the defensive, the forces of capitalist restoration, including high officials in the Chinese Communist Party such as Deng Xiaoping.<sup>79</sup>

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78. Alain Badiou, "The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?" p. 291. This and all further citations to this article are from the English language translation in Badiou, *Polemics*.

79. *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*, p. 17.

Mao's famous call to "bombard the headquarters" (the revisionist headquarters) of the Communist Party of China flowed from his scientific understanding of the contradictions of socialist society, its political economy, and the very nature of socialism as a *transition* from the old society towards the communist future. This transition, as discussed in the previous section, is and can only be the dictatorship of the proletariat, which must advance—continuously but through stages and twists and turns—until all of the conditions that give rise to class society (the "4 Alls") have been finally eliminated.

This *materialist* understanding of the goal and content of communist revolution (to overcome the division of society into classes) and of the means to get there (the dictatorship of the proletariat—and the continuation of the revolution under that dictatorship) is quite opposite to Badiou's analysis of the GPCR.

In its most immediate sense, the Cultural Revolution was a monumental struggle to *seize back* those portions of political power that had been usurped by the "capitalist roaders" inside the Communist Party of China, who exerted considerable and growing authority in much of the administrative apparatus and planning councils, in the military, and in the educational, health, and cultural sectors. Mao Tsetung and the revolutionaries in China called forth the masses of people to prevent the reversal of the revolution and to continue to advance along the socialist road.

For 10 years, proletarian rule not only "held out" but was itself revolutionized *and* used to carry out the most far-reaching and liberating transformations human society has yet to witness: from new collective forms of factory management, to educational innovations that saw youth integrate with peasant masses, to struggles against the private appropriation of knowledge, to peasants debating out the lingering influence of Confucian morality and ideology, to the revolutionary transformation, in form and content, of traditional Chinese opera and other spheres of art and culture. Throughout, this was a revolution in the realm of ideas and ideology—in people's thinking and values—with hundreds of millions evaluating themselves and others against the standard of "serve the people," and the fundamental orientation and aims of the communist revolution.

From our perspective today, more than 30 years after the defeat of the Cultural Revolution in China, the results of the line of the capitalist roaders are vividly on display in contemporary China. We can observe with horror and revulsion the breakneck capitalist development built on the backs of countless millions of impoverished workers, the destruction of socialist agriculture and public educational and health infrastructure in the countryside, the massive despoliation of the environment, the swaggering steps China is taking in Africa and elsewhere to secure exploitative commercial interest, the glorification of individual greed ("To get rich is glorious," as Deng's slogan put it), etc. All of this is the direct result of where the "bourgeoisie in the party" was seeking to take China, and eventually succeeded in doing so.

In the critical commentary that follows, we treat two aspects of Alain Badiou's analysis of the Cultural Revolution: his overall view of the party-state structure that was being contested and revolutionized during the GPCR; and his more particular account of the Shanghai Commune of early 1967.

## Alain Badiou Wants a Different Cultural Revolution...*Against* the Communist Party

In his conference paper “The Cultural Revolution: the Last Revolution?” Badiou develops the argument that the GPCR was an exhilarating and heroic effort that, nonetheless, was bound to fail—and, worse than fail, destined to stifle the very initiative and enthusiasm of the masses it stirred—because it could not break free of and destroy what should have been its ultimate target: what he calls “the general frame of the party-state.” He explains:

Here we are at the heart of the hypothesis: the Cultural Revolution is the historical development of a contradiction. On the one hand, the issue is to arouse mass revolutionary action in the margins of the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat, or to acknowledge, in the theoretical jargon of the time, that even though the state is formally a ‘proletarian state,’ the class struggle continues, including forms of mass revolt. Mao and his followers will go so far as to say that under socialism, the bourgeoisie reconstitutes itself and organizes itself *within the Communist Party itself*. On the other hand, with actual civil war still being excluded, the general form of the relation between the party and the state, in particular concerning the use of repressive forces, must remain unchanged at least in so far as it is not really a question of *destroying* the party.<sup>80</sup> [emphasis in original]

Badiou fleetingly acknowledges Mao’s analysis that there was class struggle under socialism, and that this class struggle was directed against a new bourgeoisie within the communist party, but does not “go there” in his evaluation and analysis of the GPCR—and for someone alleging the “saturation” of the party-state paradigm, there is strikingly little critical engagement with its most advanced expression, in Mao’s theorization of *how* the party becomes a concentration point of the class contradictions in socialist society (we will return to this shortly).

There was, in Badiou’s eyes, a more fundamental contradiction—or paradox—than the class contradiction shaping the Cultural Revolution. On the one hand, mass revolutionary action was ignited by Mao as leader of the Communist Party of China. On the other hand, according to Badiou, this upsurge occurred within the existing “relation between the party and the state” and was ultimately constrained by the limits of the party-state. So, continuing with Badiou’s logic, one or the other had to give—either the party would be destroyed, or the party would reassert its (stifling) authority. And as Mao, in this account, was unwilling to follow through on the implications of his call to the masses to rebel against entrenched party authority (since this might have detonated all-out civil war and undermined the key legitimating institutions of socialist society), the Cultural Revolution crashed against the rocks of the party-state “monopoly.”

As discussed earlier, Badiou sees the party-state structure as intrinsically embodying an alien and bureaucratic-authoritarian power *over* the masses. Badiou makes two erroneous conceptual moves: he detaches the state structure from underlying production relations; and he treats the

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80. Badiou, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?,” p. 298.

party-state mechanism *under socialism* as a univocal, monolithic entity obeying its own (self-perpetuating) logic.

On the first point: in a world divided into classes, there is no ruling political apparatus that stands above classes. No ruling group in society can maintain political power unless there is a basic correspondence between the policies and actions of that group and the class and production relations on which it is based. In the present day world, including China in the period under discussion, *society can only be organized according to capitalist mechanisms and levers—the accumulation of capital and the law of value at the base of society—or according to the mechanisms and principles of a planned socialist economy and the conscious direction of economic development based on putting revolutionary politics in command.*

The repressive apparatus, the administrative structures, and economic-political policies of the state serve—and ultimately can only serve—the dominant class; and this is true even when state administrators abuse their positions and prerogatives. Put differently, there is no “bureaucratic mode of production” and no distinct “state power of bureaucracy.” Again, either bourgeois-capitalist relations of production and the dominance of capital will regulate the functioning and reproduction of society, or socialist production relations and the class dominance of the proletariat will regulate society.

But, and this brings us to the second point, bourgeois factors exist within socialist production relations, and bourgeois class forces also exist within the economy and state system of socialist society. This has to do with the transitional nature of socialist society.

We have already discussed how new privileged and bourgeois-exploiting forces are generated out of socialist relations of production. Here we are focusing on the party-state. Owing to the heightened role that politics plays in socialist society, and the need to guide economic development from the commanding heights of society, new bourgeois power centers emerge within the ruling institutions of socialist society at the highest echelons of the state-political system.

The communist party is the leading political institution in society. At the same time, the socialist state plays a decisive role in the management and direction of the socialist economy: the socialist state-owned sector is the main sphere of the socialist economy, and this sector’s key levers of development (planning ministries, etc.) are in the hands of the proletarian state, within which the party is the leading component. Fundamentally for these reasons—and not because of the role of the party, or the bureaucracy, or other institutions, as such—it becomes possible for leading revisionist officials in socialist society to turn organs of state power against the masses.

This complex relationship between the base and superstructure of socialist society underlies one of Mao’s pivotal insights into the political economy of the socialist transition. In socialist society, the power to allocate and manage means of production is expressed in a concentrated way as political leadership. It is the political and ideological content of leadership that determines whether leaders represent the revolutionary interests of the proletariat or personify capital; and what political-ideological line is in command of production units and the directing institutions of the economy reacts on, and ultimately determines, the actual (not formal) nature of

ownership; that is, whether these units and institutions are indeed functioning as socialist (not bourgeois) entities.

This has everything to do with the actual causes, dynamics, and contours of the Cultural Revolution, and it is an understanding which Badiou is ignorant of, or chooses to ignore, in drawing his conclusions.

Alain Badiou was intrigued and attracted, as were many intellectuals of his generation, by Mao's daring decision to unleash a monumental and wild mass movement against a section of leaders of the very party Mao had built and led, and against much of the governing apparatus. It seemed to many that Mao was calling for an immediate end to the leading position of the Communist Party, *pure and simple*. But this was *not* what Mao was calling for.

Badiou has very little to say about the political economy of socialism, or of capitalism for that matter. This is no small omission, if he is really critically engaging with the experience of the Cultural Revolution. This lack of—or really departure from—serious, scientific materialist engagement and analysis is in fact a major reason why he does not comprehend the depths of the Cultural Revolution. Yes, there is a profound contradiction between leadership and led in socialist society, and this contradiction has to be overcome. (This is discussed at length in the previous chapter.) But this contradiction, which assumes a concentrated expression in the relation of the party to socialist society overall, cannot be severed from the material underpinnings of socialist society and the contradiction between the capitalist road and the socialist road.

For Badiou, the Cultural Revolution, marked the

...saturation of the motif of the party, as the contemporary of what clearly appears today as the last revolution that was still attached to the motif of classes and of the class struggle....<sup>81</sup>

As we saw in the discussion of class, Badiou in recent writings has argued that there is no longer a determinate articulation of politics and class. This goes a long way towards explaining why, in his analysis of the Cultural Revolution, Badiou does not seriously engage with Mao's analysis and the associated political economy, which brings to light and pivots on the understanding that two opposing *classes* were contending for power in China. A struggle raged at the highest levels of the state apparatus, but it was not, in its essential character, an intra-bureaucratic struggle.

A new bourgeoisie whose economic core existed at the highest echelons of the party-state structures, and whose political power took organized form as a revisionist-bourgeois headquarters in the Communist Party, stood in contradiction to the proletariat led by Mao and the proletarian headquarters in the party. The proletariat still controlled the vital organs of the state—as concentrated in the revolutionary line that was overall in the leading position at the top

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81. Ibid., p. 321.

levels of the party and state and that still had initiative throughout society—but that was under relentless political-ideological assault by the revisionist headquarters.<sup>82</sup>

Because he jettisons Mao’s deep-structural analysis of socialist society, Badiou can’t square a circle of his own making: Mao, he says, held that the enemies of the revolution were a relatively small minority of the party, which “renders paradoxical the recourse to such large-scale revolutionary methods.”<sup>83</sup> No, this is not a matter of paradox but an application of materialist dialectics. This “small minority” was the core of an emergent bourgeois class. The Cultural Revolution was a trial of strength between two headquarters, concentrating the interests and outlook of two different classes.

The two lines contesting at the highest levels of the party (and state) each had real material roots in the contradictory nature of the socio-economic system of socialism, and each was mobilizing social bases throughout society. This struggle became focused up over whether the society would be continuing and deepening the revolution or in fact reversing that revolution; and it developed into an all-out struggle over which class would ultimately hold state power. Badiou would be correct about his “paradox” if the GPCR were a conflict within a classless bureaucracy, rather than an actual concentration of different and opposing class interests and different and opposing societal projects, expressing the objective conflict between the two roads that open up under socialism: one towards communism, and the other back towards capitalism.

This reality, not (classless) statist forces versus (classless) anti-statist forces, explains the actual nature of the GPCR. This reality explains the ferocity of battle on the side of the capitalist roaders who mobilized social forces and fought bitterly for their vision and program for China (and who sometimes rallied against Mao in the name of restricting the scope and reach of a revolutionary state that was “putting politics in command”); and, on the other side, the proletarian revolutionaries who mobilized broad sections of masses to fight to advance China further on the socialist road—the only road that would, in conjunction with the revolutionary struggle all over the world, eventually lead to communism.

Badiou gets it wrong again, very wrong, in his recent collection of essays, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*. He tells us:

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82. Badiou continues to misinterpret and distort Mao’s line on the character of a new bourgeoisie, its actual roots in the material-social conditions of socialist society, and the actual danger that it poses—in short, the new bourgeoisie representing the capitalist aspects of socialist production relations, the new bourgeoisie as the capitalist road personified, and the potential to restore capitalism. In *Logics of the Worlds*, Badiou writes: “State revolutionary subjectivity is identified as an implacable struggle against the factions that arise from wealth or hereditary privilege. Mao’s language is no different, including when he’s dealing with the hereditary privileges reconstituted by the power of the Communist Party” (Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 26). No, the capitalist roaders are not principally the inheritors of wealth and position, nor principally transmitting wealth and position to kin. They stand in a determinate (bourgeois) relationship to the means of production, based on the coming together of the following two elements: their objective position—in the top structures of the party, which plays a decisive role in leading the state economy; and on the line that they promote—putting bourgeois expertise, the law of value, efficiency for the sake of efficiency, etc., in command of economic development.

83. Ibid., p. 304.



The Cultural Revolution attempted this test [“to steep the party in the mass movement in order to regenerate it, to debureaucratize it, and launch it on the transformation of the real world”], and rapidly became chaotic and violent, given that the definition of the enemy was uncertain, and that it was directed against the single pillar of society: the Communist Party itself. Mao is not blameless for this, as he declared, ‘Don’t you know where the bourgeoisie is? It’s within the Communist Party!’<sup>84</sup>

So the intense (what Badiou calls the “chaotic and violent”) character of the Cultural Revolution derives from an “uncertain definition” of the enemy. In fact, the “definition” of the enemy was very certain: it was the capitalist roaders at the highest levels of the party—but not, as in Badiou’s distorted view, the party itself. As for blame? Mao can only be blamed for developing a scientific analysis of socialist society and opening a liberating pathway to continuing the revolution.

### *A Brief Aside on Stalin: Badiou’s Idealism Versus Mao’s Scientific Evaluation*

The GPCR was far more than simply a struggle against the capitalist roaders in power. Mao was seeking not only to prevent the enemies of socialism from coming to power but also to dig away at the soil that was giving rise to crop after crop of capitalist roaders in China. Mao had closely studied the experience of the socialist revolution in the Soviet Union under the leadership of Stalin and the accession to power of the revisionists in that country led by Nikita Khrushchev. And this extensive study had greatly contributed to Mao’s deeper scientific understanding of the nature of socialist society, of the class struggle within that society, and of correct, and incorrect, means and methods for carrying forward that struggle on the part of the proletariat and in accordance with its revolutionary interests, yes, as a class.

Stalin had not hesitated to knock down opponents of the socialist transformation. But, to an increasing and increasingly damaging degree, especially as the Soviet Union faced very real and growing threats, particularly from Nazi Germany after Hitler came to power there in the early 1930s, Stalin failed to distinguish between contradictions among the people and contradictions between the people and the enemy (concentrated in failing to differentiate between, on the one hand, active efforts to undermine and overthrow the socialist state, and dissent and opposition on the other). It was not paranoia or hunger for power that drove Stalin to quash dissent that reflected disagreements with policy, or even with socialism, but rather this inability to correctly distinguish and utilize different methods in handling these two qualitatively different types of contradictions (suppression and punishment for counter-revolution, and persuasion, debate, and ideological struggle in resolving contradictions among the people). Further, what concerned Mao was that Stalin had proven incapable of arming the party and the masses with the ability to understand *why* capitalist roaders were generated, batch after batch, within socialist society, and how to *identify* and *defeat* the politics and program of the capitalist roaders. Stalin was not able to find—he did not really recognize, or at least did not fully recognize, the need to develop—the **forms of mass mobilization** that were essential in order to combat the capitalist roaders.

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84. Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, p. 110.

Although Badiou, perilously akin to so many common liberals and anti-communists, hurls the word “Stalinist” around as a swear word throughout his works, he brings forward very little scientific understanding of Stalin’s actual—and serious—errors, and especially the actual roots of those errors and what Mao did—scientifically—to identify them. Badiou does not want to—or, in any case, does not—look at Stalin’s incomplete and flawed understanding of the nature of socialist society and its contradictions. Instead, Badiou offers a supposedly “communist” coloration to the classic Orwellian portrayal of a power-hungry, faceless bureaucracy terrorizing the masses in whose name it is supposed to be ruling.

In fact, the enemies of the revolution targeted by Stalin were, quite often at least, real enough, but owing to his metaphysical and erroneous view of socialist society (the supposed non-existence of antagonistic classes under socialism), Stalin was at a loss to explain the origin of these forces or the means to combat them. He did not generally see them as representatives of remaining bourgeois relations of production (which were denied or misunderstood) but rather as direct emissaries of one or another enemy political power. Thus, carrying out the class struggle was confounded with and even at times reduced to (or theorized as) a counter-espionage operation.

Alain Badiou appreciates Mao for having found different means of struggle, but he does not understand *why* Mao chose a different path—and Badiou understands even less the material basis, within the real contradictions of socialist society, not only for the restoration of capitalism but for carrying the socialist revolution forward.

The form and path that Mao forged was, in his words, “to arouse the broad masses to expose our dark aspect openly, in an all-around way and from below.”<sup>85</sup> Furthermore, the whole Cultural Revolution was grounded fundamentally in Mao’s understanding of how the socialist revolution can only advance by involving the masses of people and relying on them to transform material conditions and transform themselves.

Stalin did not give adequate weight to the role of consciousness, to issues of ideology, to the need for the communist revolution, to (in Marx’s phrase) effect the “most radical rupture with traditional ideas” (along with the “radical rupture with traditional property relations”). There was a pronounced tendency on Stalin’s part to see the transformation of capitalist property relations, the development of the socialist economy, and the strengthening of the institutions of the socialist state as creating the requisite conditions for a collective-cooperative ethos. Stalin saw this in a mechanical materialist way, and Mao further developed dialectical materialism in his response.

Mao recognized in a whole new way the dynamic and critical role that consciousness plays in the revolutionary process, and the ways in which traditional ideas, values, and culture in socialist society strengthen bourgeois forces and even react back on the ownership system. In this regard, Mao offered this trenchant observation about the Cultural Revolution in 1967: “The struggle against the capitalist roaders in the Party is the principal task, but not the object. The object is to

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85. Mao Tsetung, quoted in “Ninth Party Congress Report” in *The Ninth National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Documents)*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1969), p. 27.

solve the problem of world outlook and eradicate revisionism.”<sup>86</sup> By world outlook, Mao is referring to people taking up and deepening their grasp of the scientific communist understanding of reality and specifically of human society; to communist consciousness and morality, putting the interests of world humanity and the advance of the world proletarian revolution first; and to people consciously and voluntarily casting off the enslaving traditions, ideas, and values of class society.

Badiou’s “paradox” of large-scale methods of struggle ranged against a relative handful also misses this aspect: the ideological dimension of the Cultural Revolution, and the fact that, even though the target was a narrow one (in short, those in top positions in the party who were leading, and determined to lead, society onto the capitalist road), the question of outlook was a societal one that had assumed an acute character (for instance, Liu Shaoqi, the leading capitalist roader at the start of the Cultural Revolution, had written a work, *How To Be A Good Communist*, which had been a staple of party training but which was in reality a brief for “How to Be a Good Revisionist!”).

Instead of going forward from Mao and his analysis of class struggle under socialism, Badiou goes back to a pre-Mao, non-Marxist analysis of bureaucracy and authoritarianism, which in its anti-revolutionary essence is not much different from “anti-totalitarian” theory (as much as Badiou formally abjures that theory).

### ***Class Dictatorship or Party Monopoly?***

In “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” Badiou describes the August 1966 “16-Point Decision” that guided the early stages of the Cultural Revolution as “still heterogeneous...because...it prepares the successive impasses of the movement in its relation to the party-state.”<sup>87</sup> Heterogeneous, as Badiou sees it, because Mao was caught in the conundrum of wanting to break the vise-grip of the party while being unwilling to call for the destruction of the party and, with it, the dictatorship of the proletariat (the “party-state” in Badiou’s terminology). Thus, according to Badiou, the GPCR was fatally flawed from its very initiation.

In his “reading of the text” of the “16-Point Decision,” Badiou cites a passage that extols the new and variegated organizations formed by the rebel masses *outside* the party (the “cultural revolutionary groups,” various committees, etc.) as evidence that:

[T]he Maoist group, in August of 1966, envisions the destruction of the political monopoly of the Party.<sup>88</sup>

Badiou sees the *mass democracy* of the Cultural Revolution in fundamental (antagonistic) contradiction to the *authority* of the party. He interchanges the term “monopoly” with authority,

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86. Mao Tsetung, “Excerpts from *A Talk by Chairman Mao with a Foreign [Albanian] Military Delegation*,” in David Milton, Nancy Milton and Franz Schurman, eds., *People’s China* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), pp. 263-64.

87. Badiou, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” p. 305.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 303.

or implies that “centralized authority” leads to “political monopoly”—which, once again, Badiou sees in classless, non-materialist terms.

We need to step back and take further measure of this core argument, its confusions and distortions, and some of the real questions it throws up.

1) There was a monopoly of power in revolutionary China, that of a class dictatorship exercised by the proletariat in alliance with the great majority of society over old and new bourgeois and exploiting forces. But this was not, as Badiou alleges, a situation in which the Communist Party held a “monopoly” of political power *over* the masses.

The Communist Party was the institutionalized *leading* force in society, while the masses of people were the *main* force in transforming society and, through the process of remaking society and transforming themselves, taking ever greater responsibility for ruling society.

Where, to take one historical example, is Badiou’s “monopoly of the Party” in the struggle to form the rural people’s communes in 1958-59? Peasants in advanced cooperatives took initiative and forged experimental economic-social units of higher levels of collectivization. The party, acting as a vanguard, popularized these advanced experiences. The Great Leap Forward grew out of this initial upsurge and led to the creation of new organs of power in the countryside, involving the masses in base-level responsibilities of administration and focusing attention on cardinal affairs of society and the world.

The relationship between centralized authority and mass initiative and mass democracy is a unity of opposites, not mere—or formal bourgeois logical—opposition.

Could the centralized authority of the party be used in such a way as to stifle the masses? Yes, this is entirely possible, and indeed was happening in China, acutely so in 1962-1966. In the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward there was a growing constriction of political life, a constriction evincing features of a “monopolization of politics,” if one wants to use Badiou’s terminology. But this was not an inevitable outcome, or structural imperative, of a communist vanguard. It was the expression of the growing strength and influence of a revisionist headquarters within the party.

In the period of 1962-1966, the forces headed by Liu Shaoqi and other leading capitalist roaders took advantage of the dislocations of the Great Leap Forward period and the need to make some adjustments to fight for a program of capitalist-oriented “adjustment” and restructuring. It was a program that corresponded to bourgeois class interest: restoring one-person management in factories, shifting economic performance indicators away from output towards profit targets, elevating technological efficiency above all else, etc.

With this came the assertion of a revisionist politics: an attempt to impose a bureaucratic order based on strict hierarchical subordination and depolitization. The worker-peasant masses were expected to be docile and slavish in thinking and action.

Mao tried to counter this in various ways. He launched a Socialist Education Movement. There was a push in the army to revive and popularize the “Yenan spirit” of serving the people, making revolution, and taking up the study of revolutionary theory.

These efforts proved inadequate to combating the capitalist roaders. The Cultural Revolution was the form and method Mao discovered. (Mao commented that he, along with other revolutionary leaders, had tried different approaches for a number of years.) One of Mao’s goals during the GPCR was to create the best conditions for the masses to understand the ideological and political character and program of the capitalist roaders to aid the masses in sorting out genuine revolution from revisionism. The Cultural Revolution opened unprecedented space for the masses to wage political and ideological struggle and promoted a critical and questioning spirit and atmosphere.

Thus, the “big-character wall posters,” the “big debates,” the “big airing of views,” the “big contentions,” as these practices came to be called, and the enormous resources placed at the disposal of the masses by the socialist state to carry out mass debates, mass criticism, and mass political mobilization.

Mao, however, did not view these as merely expedient or temporary measures of the Cultural Revolution. (It is worth noting that in 1975 the right to strike was inscribed into the new constitution.) He saw such rights and practices as necessary elements of the kind of robust society socialism must be. And it is telling that after carrying out their counter-revolutionary coup in 1976, the capitalist roaders moved quickly to rescind these and other rights and to vilify such practices.

2) Badiou argues that the Maoist leadership was imposing unacceptable constraints and limitations on the masses during the Cultural Revolution, proof of “the political monopoly of the Party”:

[W]hen it comes from the leadership of a communist party, we observe that, through crucial restrictions on the freedom of criticism, some kind of lock is put on the revolutionary impulse to which the text constantly appeals.<sup>89</sup>

Badiou points to several such “restrictions.” He mentions the revolutionary headquarters’ evaluation that the vast majority of cadre could be remolded and that the struggle should be focused on the relative handful of capitalist roaders in high positions of authority. Badiou also mentions the enumeration of special principles and methods of struggle with regard to prosecuting the political-ideological struggle in the military. Badiou sees all this as inhibiting “the revolutionary impulse.”

But these were not arbitrary and self-serving restrictions. Rather, revolutionary leadership was making a scientific assessment of the situation and developing a framework for a highly complicated and high-risk struggle. This is precisely what it means to lead—to lead in a way that both safeguards the rule of the proletariat and, as Mao was summing up on the eve of the

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89. Ibid.

Cultural Revolution, to lead in a way that was willing to spring society into the air to reinvigorate that rule.

Here we have to cut through some of the idealist fog of the radical democratic intellectual wanting no constraints and no restrictions.

Revolution is not a dalliance or a game. Badiou knows full well that different political groupings emerged during the GPCR, taking issue with and organizing in opposition to the guidance of the “16-Point Decision.” He knows full well that the Maoist leadership core (and Mao personally) waged intense struggle with these forces, some of whom had been prominent Red Guard leaders. The views and positions calling for the “overthrow of all cadre,” or an end to all bureaucracy, and for targeting suspected revisionist authority in the People’s Liberation Army and launching power seizures in the PLA—these were *lines* around which political formations were mobilizing social forces. These were not merely issues of free speech, although people certainly did argue them out; they were lines with real-world consequences—and, more to the point, particular lines that would, had they not been opposed, have had disastrous consequences for the Chinese revolution and for the world revolution.

Let’s go further with this. Badiou raises the objection that the “16-Point Decision” does not call for the overthrow of the army: “a revolution must break down the repressive apparatus of the state it aims to transform from top to bottom.”<sup>90</sup>

Certainly the problem of carrying out the Cultural Revolution in the army was a very vexing one complicated by a number of factors, particularly the fact that Lin Biao, who had allied himself with Mao at the beginning of the GPCR, was in charge of the PLA. (Later Lin Biao would oppose the continuation and deepening of the Cultural Revolution.) But while the reality was contradictory, it is still necessary to recognize that the PLA was, in its principal aspect, the pillar of the proletarian state that enabled the Cultural Revolution to proceed and, at the same time, for proletarian state power to be maintained—without which there would, in fact, be no Cultural Revolution, no socialism, and no advance towards communism. And the PLA played an important role in assisting the revolutionary masses in seizing back political power in those areas where it had been usurped. Badiou’s call to “break down the oppressive apparatus of the state” is nothing less than a call to *overthrow the dictatorship of the proletariat—and, with that, once again, to destroy the basis for continuing the advance towards the eventual abolition of the state, once the material and ideological conditions for that had been achieved, not just in China, by itself, but in the world as a whole.*

In response to Alain Badiou, it must be said emphatically and unambiguously: the Maoist revolutionary headquarters was acting as a vanguard in power. It was initiating an unprecedented “revolution within the revolution” and setting a framework for this struggle. This revolution entailed incalculable risks—not least the possible loss of power, the danger of U.S. imperialist intervention (with the U.S. rapidly escalating its war in Vietnam and threatening military action against China), and later the danger of Soviet social-imperialist attack (the Soviet Union had ceased to be a socialist country in the mid-1950s after Stalin’s death, and emerged as a capitalist-

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90. Ibid., p. 305.

imperialist power). Yes, constraints were imposed—necessary constraints. Again, this is not a game.

Were there ways in which, even in this incredible atmosphere, things could have been opened up more? Clearly, there is further investigation to be done, more to be understood, and criticisms to be made and deepened. But none of this negates or vitiates the need for a leading group in socialist society; it is not a question of whether such leadership is necessary, but how best to exercise it.

3) Contrary to Badiou's claim, at no time did Mao envision the Cultural Revolution as an assault on the leading and vanguard role of the Communist Party as such. Rather, Mao saw the Cultural Revolution as a means to overthrow the capitalist roaders and their headquarters within the party *and* at the same time to revolutionize the entire party—in the theoretical training of its leaders and rank and file, in recruitment, in the party's relations with the masses, including mass criticism of cadre—so that it could play its indispensable vanguard role. The GPCR administered a kind of ideological shock to *all* cadre, posing the question for the 95 percent of the cadres (the proportion cited in the "16-Point Decision") that Mao felt could re-take the socialist road: for whom and for what is the communist revolution, and what does it mean to serve the masses as a vanguard force?

Mao was not, as Badiou would have it, the ultimate (if perhaps reluctant) protector of an oppressive party-state bureaucracy; rather, he was fighting to keep society—its state system, its economy, and social institutions—on the socialist road.

In light of Mao's analysis of the structural determinants and class location of a new bourgeoisie, its core at the apex of ruling and economic structures, Badiou is wrong when he states in the passage cited above that Mao sought to "arouse mass revolutionary action in the margins of the state of the dictatorship." A huge section of Chinese society was mobilized and battles were fought out in institutions large and small throughout the country. Mao was drawing the masses' attention to policies, to programs, to class forces concentrated at the *highest levels of society, state, and the party*—and calling on the masses to engage in struggles, the outcome of which would determine the very character of society.

### ***Conclusion***

With the revolutionary line of Mao in command of the party and with the unprecedented involvement of the masses struggling over the direction of society and increasingly drawn into organs of power, it was possible to unite the majority of the party to continue the revolution forward. Once the revisionist line triumphed in the party with the revisionist coup after Mao's death in 1976, many, if not most, of these same individuals went along.<sup>91</sup> Perhaps this is proof to Badiou that the GPCR failed because it did not dismantle the "party-state," just as it failed to dismantle the PLA which was used to carry out the counter-revolutionary coup d'état of 1976.

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91. Not all the cadres, of course, served the capitalist roaders. There were extensive purges and arrests following the arrest of the "gang of four."

On the contrary, it is evidence of the decisive relationship between the line leading at the top levels of the party and the character and direction of state and society.

In reality, the material basis existed in society for a “party-state” structure to serve *either* the capitalist or the socialist road. This can be seen *both* in the tremendous advances made in constructing new socialist relations during the decade of the Cultural Revolution *and* in the destruction of socialism and the rapid and brutal development of capitalism once the revolutionary leadership core had been defeated and the leading line in the party had been transformed into its opposite. Of course, the only thing the Communist Party of China under Deng Xiaoping and his successors has in common with communism is its name.

From the perspective of Badiou’s goal, “to affirm a politics ‘without party,’” he can only conclude that the Cultural Revolution was “ended in failure.”<sup>92</sup> But from the perspective of making revolution, we draw an opposite conclusion: The Cultural Revolution stands as testament to the power and potential of proletarian revolution to transform social conditions and for the people to transform themselves in the course of struggle. It remains the high-water mark, so far, in the struggle for communism, even as the challenge remains of advancing even further in this revolution, precisely on the basis of correctly, scientifically summing up this experience—building on its overwhelmingly positive character and achievements and at the same time learning from its actual (not imagined) errors and shortcomings.

The GPCR that Alain Badiou upholds never existed, or at least never existed in the way that Badiou sees it. And since the GPCR that actually took place did not (fortunately) live up to Badiou’s criteria, it can only (in Badiou’s rendering) be considered a failure.

The capitalist roaders eventually won out in 1976. But the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution did not fail; it was defeated, and it was defeated principally because the objective balance of forces proved unfavorable. The social-political forces of capitalism in China and on a world scale were stronger. This is not to say, however, that such a defeat was the only outcome possible. While there were very powerful factors aiding counterrevolution, and while Mao’s line was overall a correct and revolutionary one, weaknesses of conception, methodology, and orientation on the part of Mao and the communist revolutionaries also influenced the alignment of forces prevailing at the time of the reactionary coup.

These are issues that genuine revolutionaries need to dig into further. But in his method of summation of the Cultural Revolution, Alain Badiou rejects the advanced theoretical understanding that guided it and the liberatory practice that this understanding made possible. The capitalist roaders succeeded in reversing the revolution. Alain Badiou wants to impose his own variant of putting the revolution in reverse—back within the conceptual and practical confines of bourgeois society and in particular bourgeois democracy—however much Badiou may seek to rebrand this as “communism.”

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92. Badiou, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” p. 321.



## The Shanghai Commune of 1967

For Alain Badiou, the exemplary contemporary instance of the “communist hypothesis” (understood as mass democracy “at a distance from the state”) materialized in the short-lived Shanghai Commune of early 1967. In his speech at the March 2009 conference, “The Idea of Communism,” Badiou identified the Shanghai Commune, along with the 1792-94 phase of the French Revolution, as a defining historical moment (“event”) of an egalitarian, emancipatory politics.

Taking the measure of the entire arc of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of 1966-76, Badiou argues that the “authentically revolutionary sequence (in the sense of the existence of a new thinking of politics) is to be found *only* in its initial segment (1965-8).”<sup>93</sup> [emphasis ours] In Badiou’s reading, the early phase of 1966-68 was marked by mass upheavals that not only overthrew oppressive officials in high positions of party and state authority (those whom Mao analyzed as “capitalist roaders”) but also brought forth the outlines of new instrumentalities of power and governance that began to challenge and transcend the party-state system.

This interpretation of the Cultural Revolution is not unique to Alain Badiou. It has been articulated in various permutations by progressive China scholars like Maurice Meisner. It was taken up by currents of international Maoism, especially in France in the late 1960s, and subsequently by intellectuals like French political economist Charles Bettelheim. Not least, in the Cultural Revolution itself, some Red Guard formations advocated that the Cultural Revolution would succeed if and only if it became a full-scale assault on all cadre and existing structures of power. Alain Badiou has resuscitated key elements of this line, declaring that the Shanghai Commune was the highest expression of efforts from below to create structures “at a distance from the state” in a fully formed socialist society, but was curbed and suppressed owing to Mao’s decision to reassert party-state authority.

So we turn our attention to this historical episode: how the Shanghai Commune came to be, its principles of organization, and why Mao felt it was not a suitable form for carrying forward all-the-way revolution in the concrete circumstances of the class struggle within China and in the world. We will see that Badiou’s approach ends up papering over the complexity and problems of the Commune experiment itself, while distorting Mao’s analysis of the limitations of the commune form.

### *Some Background*

In the 1960s, the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee had been a sharp battleground between Mao’s revolutionary line of carrying forward socialist revolution and a revisionist line. This revisionist line, couched in Marxist terminology, saw the tasks of revolution as essentially involving: rapid economic development, expertise in command, tight structures of political and organizational control in which worker diligence and obedience were valued and rewarded above all, and a kind of pacifying social welfarism for the masses. While the party in Shanghai had brought forward some outstanding proletarian revolutionary leaders, by the start of the Cultural

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93. Badiou, *The Century*, p. 62.

Revolution the municipal committee was firmly in the hands of the revisionist headquarters within the Chinese Communist Party. Shanghai, China's largest urban and industrial center, would be a major battleground and proving ground of the Cultural Revolution.

The basic orientation for the Cultural Revolution was set, as mentioned, by the "16-Point Decision" of August 1966. Summing up several months of intense revolutionary activity, it called for mass criticism, mass debate, and mass mobilization, and for the "overthrow of those persons in authority who are taking the capitalist road."

Shanghai witnessed the first city-wide "power seizure" by the revolutionary masses. The main target was the entrenched and encrusted revisionist leadership apparatus of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee. By early January, it came under sustained political assault by rebel forces and would be overthrown. Throughout January, different levels of Shanghai's government and administrative apparatus were also overthrown. The "January Storm," as this revolutionary uprising came to be called, was a defining and epochal moment of the Cultural Revolution.<sup>94</sup>

The initial impetus for the revolutionary movement in Shanghai came from radical students (the Red Guards). It spread to factories and communities, leading to the establishment of different worker rebel groups. Some of the groups had their origins in the circumstances facing particular sectors of workers, such as temporary workers from the countryside; others grew out of Red Guard tendencies; some of the worker formations professing loyalty to Mao were actually instigated by the revisionists—to cover their tracks and to fortify their social base in the face of a mounting and popularly based political-ideological onslaught.

The leading radical workers group in the city was the Workers General Headquarters, born of an alliance of several rebel worker organizations in November 1966. The Workers General Headquarters was closely allied with the Maoist revolutionary headquarters in the party. It called out the municipal party leadership for betraying the cause of revolution; mobilized workers and broad segments of the population to confront this leadership; and eventually pressed demands for new organs of proletarian power.

The "rebel mass organizations" were repeatedly rebuffed by the local revisionist leadership. Some sections of radical workers, angered by the obstinacy and arrogance of the conservative leadership of the Municipal Party Committee, sought to take their case directly to Mao in Beijing. On November 11-12, they stopped production and even commandeered a train, intending to bring masses with them to Beijing. This was struggled against by the revolutionary forces who argued that it was necessary both to keep the city's economy running and fulfill the city's responsibility to the entire national economy, and to wage the revolutionary political struggle. Importantly, in this setting of sharpening political and ideological struggle and mounting disaffection with the city leadership, the more advanced rebel forces began to

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94. Accounts of the January Shanghai Storm and the Shanghai Commune, from different political perspectives and with different descriptions of particular incidents, can be found in Gerald Tannenbaum, "The 1967 Shanghai January Revolution Revisited," *Eastern Horizon*, May-June 1968, pp. 7-25; Jean Daubier, *A History of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Vintage, 1974); and Elizabeth J. Perry and Li Xun, *Proletarian Power: Shanghai in the Cultural Revolution* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

consolidate organization and gain more of a sense of the need to take greater responsibility for the management of the economy—even as the main power seizure lay ahead.

One of the main tactics of the conservative power-holders was to try to mollify growing worker dissatisfaction and divert radical mobilization by offering all kinds of economic concessions, such as higher wages, bonuses, and travel allowances. This came to be called the “economist wind.” And it underscored the complexity of the struggle, since sections of workers were raising some of these demands. But this was a calculated move by the revisionists to distract attention and energy away from the great political debates and political struggles over whether China would remain on the socialist road.

The genuine revolutionaries, with Zhang Chunqiao<sup>95</sup> playing a pivotal leadership role, fought tirelessly to redirect the focus of the Shanghai workers towards the cardinal questions facing the Cultural Revolution, in particular the sharply posed question of what line would be in command of the local party committee. This “wind” would blow through the final days of December and early January.

In the first few days of January 1967, as the terms of the struggle got clarified and the revolutionary forces accumulated strength, the class struggle took a leap. On January 3, radicals took over one of the three major newspapers in the city. In the days immediately following, the Workers General Headquarters issued a message to the population denouncing economism and calling for unity in the mass movement. A million people gathered as the city’s old-line leadership was denounced. By January 6 the mayor had lost legitimacy and authority. Over the course of the next ten days, rebel forces intensified their offensive, moving against various levels of governance and administration; taking charge of the railways and docks; and keeping the city’s utilities functioning. On January 15, the rebels were able to declare new leadership in the city.

Zhang Chunqiao and Wang Hongwen (leader of the Workers Headquarters) took primary responsibility for organizing new leadership structures, while the People’s Liberation Army would later aid the consolidation of power by the “rebel mass organizations.”

There was nothing restrained and pre-planned about what happened. Mao had issued the call to “bombard the headquarters” of revisionism in the Communist Party. The upsurge saw incredible mass protest, confrontation and disruption, the spread of new organizations, demands being pressed on party and administrative officials, novel link-ups and exchanges between different sections of people, students going to factories to incite protest, and other forms of mass struggle. The universities, it should be recalled, shut down during these early phases of the Cultural Revolution. The level of debate and the intensity of struggle led to “messy” and dangerous

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95. Zhang Chunqiao was a central figure in the revolutionary headquarters of the Chinese Communist Party. He played a key role throughout the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), both as a political leader and as a theorist. In addition to his role in the early stages and the January Shanghai Storm, he was also part of the radical leadership core on whom Mao relied in the complicated political and ideological battles of the 1973-1976 period. Zhang’s essay, “On Exercising All-Around Dictatorship Over the Bourgeoisie” is a groundbreaking analysis of the relations of production under socialism. Zhang Chunqiao was one of the main revolutionary leaders arrested (part of the “gang of four”) in the counter-revolutionary coup right after Mao’s death. He died in the 1990s.

situations. At one point revolutionary leader Zhang Chunqiao was rallying forces to stop the commandeering of a train; at another point, he came under siege at his home by conservative forces.

And importantly, innovative things, experimental social and institutional practices, took hold as the old power was overthrown and new power constituted. On February 5, 1967, the Shanghai Commune was formally proclaimed, with Zhang Chunqiao its head.

### ***The Shanghai Commune: Its Emergence and Principles***

Alain Badiou, as we saw earlier, holds that an emancipatory politics both reveals and coheres

...the strictly generic humanity of the people engaged in them. In their principles of action, these political sequences take no account of any particular interests. They bring about a representation of the collective capacity on the basis of a rigorous equality between each of their agents.<sup>96</sup>

According to Badiou, the Shanghai Commune embodied these features. We will put this to the test and show that a) “generic humanity” was in reality class-divided humanity; b) there is an objective contradiction between particular and higher interest that requires leadership and direction; and c) the application of the principle of “rigorous equality between each of the agents” was precisely an institutional weakness of the Commune that would have opened far too much space for counter-revolution had the Commune persisted.

Let us return to the formation of the Shanghai Commune.

The revolutionary national media in 1966 had pointed to the lessons of the Paris Commune of 1871: the revolutionary masses could not simply take hold of the old state machinery but had to create new forms of organized power. The “16-Point Decision” referenced the system of elections of the Paris Commune.

What principles guided governance in the new revolutionary power of the Shanghai Commune? The “16-Point Decision” had provided some compass points: the importance of a system of general elections to standing mass organizations based on lists of candidates being forwarded and reviewed by the masses; criticism at any time of members of the various new Cultural Revolution groups, and the principle of replacement through election or recall of members or delegates who proved to be incompetent.

The Shanghai Commune was made up of representatives of mass revolutionary organizations, some 38 in all. Mao was quick to hail the seizure of power by rebels in Shanghai; and he recognized that it represented a qualitatively new political development and a great further step in incorporating the revolutionary masses into the structure of power.

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96. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 97.

Alain Badiou holds that the Shanghai Commune was something approaching unmediated democracy. But this is not accurate.

To begin with, there was a main force within the Shanghai Commune, the Workers General Headquarters—and revolutionary leadership was being given by Zhang Chunqiao and others who were applying, and summing up the results in applying, Mao’s revolutionary line. Second, the Commune was not a “come one, come all” formation but functioned with political criteria setting terms for participation and elections. Conservative groupings that had stood with the old party leadership were excluded, as were various factions and groupings that had attacked the revolutionary forces in the vanguard of this struggle. Indeed, some groupings with an opposing line challenged the legitimacy of the Shanghai Commune and reportedly moved to constitute a New Shanghai People’s Commune. This reflected the influence of what came to be called the “overthrow all” line—that is, the overthrow of all established leaders and administrators, including revolutionaries like Zhang Chunqiao—and was also overlaid with the maneuvering of forces from the old order seeking to mask comeback attempts.

The Shanghai Commune did not immediately implement the principle of direct elections of all officials as it was filling the void created by the overthrow of the Municipal Party Committee. But the “commune principle” took form in several key ways:

- Worker-representatives comprising the staff of the commune served not as individuals within a unified structure but precisely as delegates of the mass organizations from which candidacy lists were drawn, with these representatives subject to mass criticism and supervision, as well as recall.
- Delegates were expected to participate in productive labor in order to minimize status differences between them and ordinary members of the mass organizations.
- No special role or position was accorded any political force in the Shanghai Commune. The Communist Party did not have any institutionalized leadership within the Commune (although, again, leading communists like Zhang Chunqiao were objectively playing a certain leadership role).

In these ways, the Shanghai Commune both embodied certain key features of the Paris Commune *and* marked a break with the pre-Cultural Revolution system of political power characterized by the integration of all structures of governance into a unified state system and by the leading role of the Communist Party. With the formation of the Shanghai Commune, the old municipal party committee had been replaced by a kind of delegate system linked to the new mass organizations.

It is this that Alain Badiou sees as the breakthrough of the “initial sequence” of the Cultural Revolution, in two senses. First, it fits Badiou’s “maxim of equality” as constituted by and within the political mass movement:

Political equality is not what we desire or plan; it is that which we declare to be, here and now, in the heat of the moment; and not something that we should be.<sup>97</sup>

For Badiou, the Shanghai Commune was a declaration of such equality of the “here and now.” Second, what in Badiou’s view stamped the Shanghai Commune as a seminal event of the “communist hypothesis” was that it represented what Badiou considers to be a break-out from the party-state framework.

In both dimensions, Badiou’s picture of the January Shanghai Storm is greatly misleading. On the one hand, he suggests that a broad democracy was taking hold from below, *empowering* by virtue of its mass, egalitarian (classless) character—when in fact this great mass upsurge and ferment, which was indeed a profound expression of mass democracy, also contained *different social and class forces and agendas*. On the other hand, Badiou counterposes to this idealized mass movement a monolithic (classless) party-state structure—*oppressive* by virtue of its specialized functions and powers—when in fact, as we have seen, two political and ideological lines and headquarters representing different class interests were contending within the party. And the contending agendas would (and did) have radically different social outcomes, in terms of the direction of society and in terms of which class would actually rule society.

### ***Mao’s Revolutionary Criticisms of the Shanghai Commune; Badiou’s Distortions and Idealizations***

While the Shanghai Commune was being constituted and beginning to assume governance responsibilities, Mao and the Cultural Revolution Group in Beijing followed developments very closely and deliberated about the strengths and weaknesses of this new organ of power.

Would the commune be sufficient to foster the further advance of the revolution? Could it serve as a model for the rest of the country? This was not just any time but a period of increasingly turbulent and complex turns in the class struggle, marked not only by entrenched revisionist authority digging in its heels but also by attacks on the party by some rebel groupings that failed to distinguish between revisionism, rightism, and genuine revolution. Mao had also observed certain factional tendencies in the course of the revolution in Shanghai and continuing into the formation of the Shanghai Commune that hindered the ability to unite the many different mass organizations (several hundred organizations in Shanghai’s factories had not been incorporated into the Commune).

Mao summoned Zhang Chunqiao to Beijing for consultations. He pointed to some of the problems with such a locally devolved political power. Mao asked, only half-jokingly, if the commune form were adopted as the basic model and structure, whom would the foreign powers recognize? More importantly, he put his finger on a central problem: “communes are too weak when it comes to suppressing counterrevolution.”<sup>98</sup>

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97. Ibid., pp. 98-99.

98. Mao, “Talks at Three Meetings with Comrades Chang Chun-chiao and Yao Wen-yuan,” in Stuart Schram, ed., *Chairman Mao Talks to the People* (New York: 1974), p. 278.

In “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” Badiou argues that the Shanghai Commune had “no possibility of national development in so far as, on the national level, the figure of the party remains the only one allowed...”<sup>99</sup>

But Badiou certainly knows that the word commune in French means “locality” or “district” and that the local scope of the Shanghai Commune, like that of the Paris Commune of 1871, was very much part of its character. And this is indeed one of the principal weaknesses Marx pointed to when he analyzed the reason for the failure of the Paris Commune.

And what, might we ask, would be the form of nationwide power under a system of communes? Would an army exist? If so, who would lead it? How would disputes between different communes be handled? How would the great gap between city and countryside be narrowed? And if a nationwide system of power could somehow be cobbled together out of the communes, who would lead it? The aspect of direct democracy that the commune form brought forward (important dimensions of which were in fact preserved in the revolutionary committee form that would replace it) would cease to have the same kind of meaning in such a nationwide system that would encompass—and would, in reality and of necessity, subsume—all the many different local communes.

These are exactly the kinds of factors that led Mao to conclude that the Shanghai Commune could not be generalized.

Two weeks after the Shanghai Commune was formed, rebels in Heilongjiang Province had brought forward a different model of governance. This was a revolutionary committee made up of three elements: 1) worker and peasant representatives of the revolutionary mass organizations, including Red Guards; 2) representatives of the People’s Liberation Army; and 3) representatives of the party cadre who had passed through the tumultuous period of the Cultural Revolution and who had united around Mao’s line.

Mao saw the revolutionary committee as a more suitable form for broadening the mass movement and waging the class struggle with revolutionary leadership. At the same time, important features of the commune model were maintained and incorporated into the revolutionary committees, including elections in the mass organizations and cadre participation in labor. Mao was summing up the rich experience of the Cultural Revolution from the standpoint of institutionalizing its gains, laying the basis for deepening the revolution, and preparing for new challenges society-wide and internationally.

On February 24 the Shanghai Commune was disbanded. Zhang Chunqiao went on television and gave a detailed explanation as to the problems and shortcomings with the commune form. The theoretical and practical issues were put before the masses. The revolutionary committee that took the Commune’s place was able to unite the large majority of the working people of Shanghai and to help sort out and resolve much of the factionalism that was still strong in the revolutionary mass organizations.

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99. Badiou, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” p. 309.

In treating the transition from the commune form to the revolutionary committee, Badiou adopts the classic bourgeois Sinologist view of the Cultural Revolution (more and more prevalent as the GPCR fades deeper into history and its realities are less and less known), pitting the “conservatives” for whom “it is a matter of putting back the local cadres after the mere fiction of a critique” and the Maoist leadership’s “a dozen persons [for whom] it is a matter of defining the stakes for the revolutionary organizations (the ‘seizing of power’) and of inspiring a lasting fear in their adversaries, all the while preserving the general framework for the exercise of power which remains in their eyes the party and the party alone.”<sup>100</sup>

Badiou is again pitting the leadership of Mao and the proletarian revolutionary headquarters in the party *against* the exercise of power by the proletariat rather than grasping their inter-relation—once again, their dialectical relation, as a unity of opposites. The Cultural Revolution and the creation of new revolutionary organs, like the revolutionary committees, involved masses of people and their representatives on a dramatically enlarged scale at every level. It involved unprecedented means for ensuring that the participation of the masses was genuine and profound; through extremely widespread debate and discussion, through continuing political-ideological struggle, and through direct leadership responsibility. (By 1973, an estimated forty thousand workers in Shanghai held leading positions in factories, other work units, and higher level municipal organs.)

Badiou sees the disbanding of the Commune and the reassertion of the party’s leading role as the oppressive return to normalcy. But the party was an object of struggle and transformation in the course of the GPCR and went through a great deal of change during this period. The masses were deeply involved not only in overthrowing the leading representatives of the capitalist road but also in helping to reconstitute the party and reinvigorate its ranks, as the party was now admitting new revolutionary members from among the youth and the rebel organizations. The masses were helping many veteran cadres fight the influence of revisionism and return to a revolutionary position. The revolutionary committees institutionalized elements of mass supervision. Here it must be said that not many of the cadres who went through the fire of mass criticism in the GPCR would agree with Badiou that it was a “mere fiction of a critique.”

Eventually the “three-in-one” combination (masses, army, party) would be adapted to combine representatives from among the masses; from among different professional, technical, intellectual/cultural strata (depending on the particular base-level institutions in question, e.g., hospitals, schools, cultural institutions, etc.); and from party cadre.

The revolutionization of the Shanghai party and the constitution of new governing structures broadened mass participation and supervision and brought the proletarian line into the leading position. This reconstituted political power could now be wielded throughout the country to transform society further in all spheres in the direction of the communist future. Shanghai, for instance, began to experiment with new educational policies and practices as part of the nationwide effort to reform the old educational system (which had actually been widening the differences between town and country and producing new elites).

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100. Ibid., p. 311.



The Shanghai Commune was a great invention and experiment of the revolutionary masses in Shanghai. It was part of the upheaval and ferment that produced all kinds of “socialist new things” and creations—some of which proved to be more in correspondence with advancing the revolution, some of which did not. Revolutionary leadership was learning from this complex struggle and summing up vital new experience.

***Badiou’s “Egalitarian Maxim” Conceals Class Contradictions and Cannot Rise Above Particular Interest***

In Mao’s rejection of the Shanghai Commune, Alain Badiou sees a betrayal of the masses and their creations of mass forms of rule and an abandonment of the very precepts that guided the launching of the Cultural Revolution. In *Metapolitics*, Badiou quotes the “16-Point Decision” of August 1966:

‘Let the masses educate themselves in this great revolutionary movement, let them learn to distinguish between the just and the unjust, between correct and incorrect ways of doing things.’

Badiou then offers a commentary:

And so a politics touches on truth provided that it is founded upon the egalitarian principle of a capacity to discern the just, or the good, which are expressions that philosophy apprehends under the aegis of the truth that the collective is capable of.<sup>101</sup>

Yes, the masses must educate themselves—and must emancipate themselves through conscious and mass struggle to change the world and themselves. This is a critical difference that sets communism apart from putschism, terrorism, and all manner of politics based on “condescending saviors.” On the other hand, the masses need dedicated and visionary leadership, grounded in a scientific understanding of society and the world, precisely to unleash the masses’ ever more conscious activism—this is a critical difference that sets communism apart from anarchism, ultra-democracy, and varieties of reformism.

Mao was leading the Cultural Revolution, a revolution marked by an historically unprecedented level of mass debate, mass struggle, and mass experimentation. Badiou sees Mao upending his earlier guidance (“let the masses educate themselves”) and trusting in the mass movement. No, Mao was *giving leadership at every stage* of the Cultural Revolution—*leadership to enable the masses to consciously change the world and themselves and to continue advancing towards communism.*

In coming to the conclusion that the commune did not correspond to the stage of development of the class struggle and could not advance the revolution, but on the contrary would make it highly vulnerable to setback and defeat, Mao was proceeding from a deep understanding of the underlying contradictions of the socialist system, the still significant gaps between the leaders

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101. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 98.

and the led, the uneven nature of the mass movement, and the fact that democracy is not an end itself but must serve the transformation of society and the world towards the goal of communism.

Let's look at two key contradictions posed by the "commune principle" of governance and by the strict implementation of the "egalitarian maxim" that anchors Badiou's politics of emancipation.

1) What does it mean to have a system of direct elections and direct recall of all officials in a society still divided into classes, where the distinction between intellectual and manual labor is still wide and continually regenerated under socialism?

You will have a situation where, as Bob Avakian has analyzed in a discussion of the Shanghai Commune, people with a greater facility with ideas, and who can articulate things better, will have advantage; and ultimately, even though the process has the appearance of a level playing field, these forces will come to dominate the process. On the other hand, as Avakian also points out, you may get the situation where people who do not have the requisite ability to deal in the realm of ideas, in a way that will keep society going in the socialist direction and the revolution moving forward, will be thrown willy-nilly, as a result of the imperative of "unmediated" rule, into positions of responsibility for which they are not prepared—and the revolution can be lost this way as well.<sup>102</sup>

At the same time, as Avakian has summed up, it is crucial that the "John Stuart Mill" principle be applied—that there be the fullest contestation of ideas and that those holding unpopular positions be able themselves to enunciate and argue vigorously for them. And in the swirl and maelstrom of intense struggle, as there was in Shanghai, you must be willing to "go to the brink." But the point is to create the most favorable possible conditions through all of this, and out of all of this, for the masses to be gaining the capability and understanding to take ever-greater responsibility for the direction of society and for administering society.

These are challenging contradictions to work through: you want to bring the basic masses forward but not quash other sectors of society. Indeed, without the necessary ferment, including what people among these other sectors bring to the process, the basic masses cannot really be brought forward to play the decisive role they must ultimately play in advancing the revolution toward the goal of a real emancipation, from the actual remaining material and ideological conditions which have been "inherited" from the old society and which mark socialism precisely as a transition from the old society to communism—which, again, can only be achieved through the triumph of the revolution on a world scale, and not in any particular country by itself, let alone in one particular area, or commune, within a country.

Badiou offers a model of democracy ostensibly "without mediation" by party and state structures or leaders—but all this does is put the masses at a disadvantage in relation to privileged and bourgeois class forces, which still exist and which continue themselves to exert a disproportionate influence in many ways in socialist society. If the masses are going to "fit themselves," to use Marx's suggestive phrase, to rule and transform society, then the inequalities

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102. See Avakian, *Dictatorship and Democracy, and the Transition to Communism*, revcom.us.

and differences in socialist society need to be recognized and acted on, and this requires a certain kind of vanguard leadership and a certain kind of state power.

Badiou, as cited above, posits that “politics touches on truth provided that it is founded upon the egalitarian principle of a capacity to discern the just, or the good.” Would that it were so simple, that the masses, through an egalitarian truth procedure (without political mediation), could “discern the just and good.” But what is “just and good” is itself a matter of class outlook—Deng Xiaoping said exploitation is good if it promotes development. And the masses are divided into the advanced, intermediate, and backward, and there will be struggle among the masses as to what is “the just and good.”

The question has to be put to Badiou: Will bourgeois and counter-revolutionary forces be allowed in on the process of democracy “at a distance from the state”? The bourgeoisie is quite adept at utilizing elections—through devices such as polling and focus groups—to shape public opinion; and even where elections are not the issue, but rather forms of so-called “deliberative democracy,” Avakian’s points about the advantage of certain people—that is, certain strata in society, which are skilled at working with ideas—will continue to have relevance and force.

2) Is local, quasi-autonomous self-governing democracy the highest to which people should aspire? And if this becomes the essential political framework and ideological horizon of decision-making, how will this affect the larger development of society—in a society and world marked by profound inequality?

Badiou, as we will recall, suggests that “events” like the Shanghai Commune rise above “particular interests.” He offers no criteria for non-particular interests other than “egalitarianism.” But in a world divided into classes, there is no non-particular interest or generic equality.

This raises the question of the “egalitarian maxim” with regard to decision-making and authority over resources: How do you work to assure that the highest interests of society and humanity are being promoted by the institutions of socialist society and not dominated by particular interests, understood as local, sectoral, short-term as opposed to long-term; national as opposed to international, etc.? As we have seen, Badiou argues that emancipatory political sequences “take no account of any particular interests,” owing to the “representation of the collective capacity on the basis of rigorous equality between each of the agents.” But particular and higher interests are in objective contradiction, and the socialist state has to lead in correctly identifying and handling this contradiction.

Let’s take an example from socialist economics, specifically China’s socialist economy in the period 1973-76.

As a consequence of the Cultural Revolution, China’s socialist economy put revolutionary politics in command of economic development. Conscious efforts were made to overcome the gaps between mental and manual labor, between town and country (and more advanced and less advanced regions), and between worker and peasant. This required society-wide coordination

and a planned economy guided by political-ideological priorities and operating with capacities to make decisions and allocate resources.

Thus, by the early 1970s, one-third of the medical staff of China's large cities, like Shanghai, was, at any given time, on the road providing mobile medical services, mainly in the countryside. Shanghai had also posted over half a million skilled workers to the interior and poorer regions of the country—sharing expertise and learning from other segments and sectors of society. Further, during the years of the Cultural Revolution, Shanghai retained only 10 percent of its locally generated revenue, the rest going to the national budget, helping to subsidize the spending requirements of the poorer regions, like Xinjiang and Tibet.<sup>103</sup>

But what if these centrally set policies and priorities were subject, in the name of a self-determining egalitarian politics, to local decision-making, to local consensus or veto by a Shanghai Commune? Should the workers of Shanghai “have the final say”—should they fight to maintain and in effect increase their “particular” (privileged) position relative to the masses in China's countryside—or should they see their role as an advanced force helping to transform the whole country and gradually narrow the difference between town and countryside?

In a society still marked by significant, and in many ways profound, class and social divisions and the corresponding ideological influences—which is the reality of socialist society, as it emerges out of the old society and for a long period into the socialist transition—the correct handling of the kinds of contradictions and necessary decision-making spoken to here will not, and cannot, result from reliance on the spontaneity of the masses (who, once again, are divided into different classes and into the advanced, intermediate, and backward at any given time). This has everything to do with the continuing need for and role of a vanguard party and what line is in the leading position, influencing decision-making and debate among the masses. (In this regard, it is worth noting that after the counter-revolutionary coup of 1976, the “reform” policies enacted by Deng Xiaoping included a reversal of budgetary policy. Shanghai and other coastal areas were allowed and encouraged to retain the greater portion of their locally generated revenues so that they could be built up as “showcases” of capitalist development. This was propounded as a corrective to top-down and bureaucratic intrusion by central planners!)

These are examples of some of the crucial questions that, by their very nature, cannot be solved on a narrow local basis. Spontaneity left to itself, including in the form of democratic decision-making, will lead to the re-emergence of inequality and the increasing influence of commodity relations—and ultimately will lead back to capitalism.

The same principles apply to the international responsibility of the socialist society and economy to bend every effort to promote the world revolution. This is another reason why far-sighted

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103. On the Cultural Revolution's breakthroughs in overcoming urban-rural gaps in health care and innovative social-medical practices, see Teh-wei Ho, “Health Care Services in China's Economic Development,” in Robert F. Dernberger, ed., *China's Development Experience in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 234; on inter-regional redistribution of provincial revenues, see Raymond Lotta, “The Theory and Practice of Maoist Planning: In Defense of a Viable and Visionary Socialism,” in Raymond Lotta, ed., *Maoist Economics and the Revolutionary Road to Communism* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1994), pp. 316-20.

vanguard leadership is required. For example, revolutionary China was sending food and other forms of material aid to revolutionary struggles in various parts of the world. The socialist state must, above all, be a base area for the world revolution. This has to be built into the very fiber of socialist society—into its economic structures, into the planning system and its priorities, into the ability of the socialist state to send people to different parts of the world to carry out various internationalist tasks and responsibilities. All of this requires society-wide coordination and allocative mechanisms. This has to be the outlook promoted in society. And it has to be a central front of ideological struggle.

To be clear, Mao's policies generally did put much greater emphasis on local initiative than had been the case in the Soviet Union when it was socialist, and important responsibilities were transferred to the regions, localities, and rural communes. With this came initiatives to simplify central administrative, ministerial, and planning structures, including streamlining of personnel.<sup>104</sup> However, this "devolution" of responsibilities was only possible *on the basis of the centralized leadership of a revolutionary line*.

Alain Badiou, on the other hand, reaches this conclusion: "Eventually, for want of support for the most radical experiments in the decentralization of the state (the 'Shanghai Commune' of early 1967), the old order had to be re-established in the worst conditions."<sup>105</sup>

As we have shown, in many different dimensions, this assertion of Badiou's is in fact in direct opposition to—and is powerfully refuted by—the actual experience of the Cultural Revolution in Shanghai and in China as a whole, and the lessons that must actually be drawn from the—scientific, materialist—summation of that experience.

### ***Summing Up: Changing the World or Hunkering on the Margins?***

The form of the Shanghai Commune did not conform to the fundamental interests of the masses of people and was not sustainable—at least not as a form through which the masses could actually and increasingly master and transform society in the direction of overcoming and finally abolishing the great divide between intellectual and manual labor and other social divisions which contain elements, or seeds, of class antagonism, exploitation, and oppression. This commune overstepped the stage of development of the revolution, in China and in the world as a whole.

It is not possible—at least not at the stage which any socialist society has so far attained, or in any socialist society in which class differences and related social divisions continue to constitute a significant social phenomenon—to administer and transform society in a revolutionary direction through the medium of communes or networks of communes. The examples given from socialist economics are only one illustration. The principles discussed here apply to issues of

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104. Through the Cultural Revolution there was a significant reduction of administrative personnel at the central government level, and at the industrial and commercial enterprise levels, it was common for administrative personnel to be cut by two-thirds. See Jean Chesneaux, *China: The People's Republic, 1949-76* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), p. 190.

105. Badiou, *Meaning of Sarkozy*, p. 110.

education, to policies and movements to bring the masses into the actual administration of power, to struggles against racism and male supremacy.

As discussed in the previous chapter, along with carrying forward the revolutionary transformation of the socialist society itself, it is necessary for the socialist state to be able to stand up to imperialism and to prevent outright attacks from imperialist or other reactionary states, or to defeat such attacks if they do come, while at the same time promoting and assisting the advance of the world revolution.

These are important lessons of the Cultural Revolution and of the experience of the Shanghai Commune.

But no serious analysis of the Cultural Revolution can ignore the reality that the revolutionary committees which were created through the Cultural Revolution were themselves ultimately unable to withstand the onslaught of the capitalist roaders. Here, too, is another lesson of the Cultural Revolution. No political structure or form is intrinsically impervious to bourgeois degeneration. The commune form, the revolutionary committee, and the communist vanguard can all be transformed into oppressive vehicles of bourgeois production and social relations.

A scientific approach to the problem pivots on the one hand, and principally, on the political and ideological line that is in the leading position within the structures, organs, and basic units of society—and most decisively at the highest levels; and on the other hand, on which forms correspond to the stage of development of the revolutionary process and will best serve its continuation and advance. Not all forms equally serve the task of enabling power to be kept in the hands of the masses *and* enabling the masses to carry forward the process of transforming the economic base of society and all the social and political relations and institutions, and the culture and ways of thinking among the people—and advancing the world revolution.

We are venturing into challenging territory. These are not the kinds of issues that Alain Badiou is prepared to seriously take in hand because his is not a scientific, dialectical materialist outlook and method, and his approach is not one of applying such an outlook and method to analyze the actual contradictions that have to be confronted, and transformed, on the path and toward the goal of communism—which means, once again, the achievement of the “4 Alls” and not some amorphous concept of “equality,” devoid of any real social and class content. Thus, while Badiou may think that he is upholding aspects of Mao and the Cultural Revolution, he misses, or misunderstands, the heart and essence of what actually needs to be upheld and built on, and he ends up objectively seeking to bury it.

Perhaps it is comforting to be satisfied, as Badiou seems to be, with the simplistic explanation that “fidelity” to the Shanghai Commune would have prevented capitalist restoration in China and is a path for an emancipatory politics. But such a shallow and false summation leaves no guideposts for present and future generations to use in setting out to make revolution; that is, to actually transform society and the world. It is a balm for a politics designed for and consigned to the margins.

## CHAPTER V: A FALSE POLITICS OF EMANCIPATION: CONCILIATING THE STATE WHILE PASSIVELY AWAITING THE “EVENT”

In *Logics of Worlds*, Alain Badiou makes the following statement about the philosophical-strategic conclusions he has reached:

[I]t is only philosophically constructible today, after a new thinking of politics has made it thinkable and practicable to situate oneself, in order to think action, from the interior of a *politics for which state power is neither an objective nor a norm.*<sup>106</sup> [emphasis ours]

What are the political and ideological implications of this “new thinking” for a so-called emancipatory politics, in the imperialist countries in particular? In this chapter, we examine Badiou’s prescriptions for a politics for “normal times” of relative stability in the advanced capitalist countries and during those rare times when society is gripped by crisis, social convulsion, and upheaval.

### **“Politics at a Distance From the State”—Or Internalizing the Dictates of Bourgeois Power?**

Alain Badiou’s enunciation of a politics “at a distance from the state” represents the abandonment of his quasi-Marxist track. We have now arrived at what Badiou describes as a “politics without party” and a coherent “political path that would this time be entirely original, without any state reference of any kind ... measured exclusively against the experiences of thought and action of which we are capable.”

While this politics is interlarded with Rousseau-ian notions of equality and “general will,” its driving force is Badiou’s belief that it is not possible to make revolution and seize power in contemporary society, particularly in the imperialist countries. He states explicitly:

The model of the centralized party made possible a new form of power that was nothing less than the power of the party itself. We are now at what I call a ‘distance from the state.’ This is first of all because the question of power is no longer ‘immediate’; nowhere does a ‘taking power’ in the insurrectional sense seem possible today.<sup>107</sup>

A first observation. If Badiou makes the non-possibility of the revolutionary seizure of power a starting point, he does not put on offer any substantive analysis for this assertion. (In the context of his general argument, in saying the question of power is no longer “immediate,” Badiou is referring to revolutionary possibility as such and the current conjuncture in any given country.)

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106. Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, p. 521.

107. Filippo Del Lucchese and Jason Smith, “We Need a Popular Discipline: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative,” Interview with Alain Badiou, Los Angeles, 2/07/07; *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 4, Summer 2008, p. 649.

Perhaps Badiou thinks that qualitative changes in class structure have erased the social basis for revolution, or that capitalism has proven itself materially and ideologically impregnable, or that reactionary militaries are simply too powerful to defeat, and so there is no prospect for the revolutionary seizure of power. But he has made no such case.

As Badiou also proceeds from the notion that state power is undesirable, not the necessary step and means for emancipating humanity, it should come as little surprise that he chooses not to “live in” the contradictions relating to the real difficulties and complexities in making revolution—including how it could be possible to go up against the brutal repressive force and military might of the imperialists, in order to win power—a revolution whose need is not the less for all the profound difficulties it would have to encounter and overcome. However, there are communists applying themselves to grappling with the possibilities and pathways for the revolutionary seizure of power in today’s world, including in the advanced capitalist countries where conditions require new approaches, different in important aspects from the model of the 1917 Russian Revolution.

So how does Badiou conceptualize politics at a “distance from the state”? It is based on what he calls “subtraction” from the state, as distinguished from “destruction” of the state:

[a subtraction] is no longer dependent on the dominant laws of the political reality of a situation. It is irreducible, however, to the destruction of these laws as well. A subtraction might leave the laws of the situation intact. What subtraction does is bring about a point of autonomy. It’s a negation, but it cannot be identified with the properly destructive part of negation.... We need an ‘originary subtraction’ capable of creating a new space of independence and autonomy from the dominant laws of the situation.<sup>108</sup>

The essence of a “subtracted” politics at a “distance from the state” lies in an “independence and autonomy,” and “unlike the insurrectional form of the party, the politics of subtraction is no longer immediately *destructive, antagonistic or militarized.*”<sup>109</sup> [emphasis ours] At the same time, this politics claims to be free of the state’s dominance and influence, as it has “subtracted” from participation in what Badiou calls the capitalo-parliamentarism of the bourgeois state. With this conceptual framework, he provides a model for a politics for the advanced capitalist countries, supposedly realized in *Organization Politique* in France (for which Badiou is a guiding figure).

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108. Del Lucchese and Smith, “We Need a Popular Discipline,” Interview with Alain Badiou, pp. 652-53.

109. Ibid., p. 650.

In renouncing a mass “insurrectionary” politics that aims for the overthrow and destruction of bourgeois state power, and its replacement by the dictatorship of the proletariat, Badiou argues, “I think we must assert that today negativity, properly speaking, does not create anything new. It destroys the old, of course, but does not give rise to a new creation.” Here a truism is married to revisionism. Revolution is not mainly about destroying the old but about constructing the new, but there can be no “new creation” absent the overthrow of the old—and led by a revolutionary line the destruction of the old is a profoundly positive and liberating process, something which Badiou “negates” (Del Lucchese and Smith, “We Need a Popular Discipline,” Interview with Alain Badiou, p. 652).



But as we shall see, Badiou's "distance from the state" has proven rather foreshortened. His political trajectory has in fact brought him to a new-found proximity to the state. Badiou is now calling for reformist "prescriptions" of the bourgeois state (while continuing to shun participation in the electoral-parliamentary apparatus).

### ***Once Again, For Badiou Line Does Not Matter, and What Kind of "Independence and Autonomy"?***

Badiou gives several examples of struggles and situations that he suggests illustrate basic aspects of his "distance-from-the-state" political model. From more recent history, he points to the peasant uprising in Chiapas, Mexico, the Solidarity workers movement in Poland, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

What stands out is that these are not emancipatory struggles led by emancipating ideology. Again, ideology and outlook count for very little in Badiou's formalist methodology. And the putative ways in which these movements might be considered "distant from the state," operating with "independence and autonomy," crash against social reality. The fundamental illusoriness, and poverty, of Badiou's concept begins to reveal itself.

- Solidarity was linked to just and popular worker resistance in Poland against the state-capitalist revisionist regime in the 1980s. But Solidarity was a mix of social-reformist and Western-inflected capitalist politics and shot through with reactionary church influences. Indeed, it had close connections to Western imperialist forces and evolved into a decisive component of the restructured reactionary state system in Poland in the 1990s.
- There is nothing progressive about Hezbollah. It represents historically outmoded relations, including those carrying the stench of feudalism, concentrated in its views towards women<sup>110</sup>. Its distance from the state, its social welfare and political institutions, is really a coexistence with the Lebanese state (within which Hezbollah's political operatives function). Further, this arrangement is made possible with the backing and support of regional state powers—and reactionary ones at that—notably Iran and Syria.
- The Chiapas movement initially raised hopes for truly radical agrarian change and a revolutionary challenge to the hated Mexican regime and Yankee imperialist domination. But facing the repressive might of the reactionary Mexican state and foreswearing as a matter of principle the revolutionary struggle for power, this movement has reached a certain limit. It has been guided into a tacit *modus vivendi* with the Mexican state. It has become a kind of holding operation defined by the barriers of existing state power and the inability to effect any fundamental or thoroughgoing economic and social transformation.

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110. Badiou sees Hezbollah as emblematic of a new politics emerging to supersede "proletarian forms of organization," and worthy as one of the "experiments that must be examined close up." Thus he negates the utterly reactionary ideological essence of this movement, while recognizing an "internal limitation" bound to "religious particularity." Badiou acknowledges that Hezbollah is "competing for state power," but wonders: "what will their relation to the state be?" (Del Lucchese and Smith, "We Need a Popular Discipline," Interview with Alain Badiou, p. 659).

Now there are conjunctural moments, such as in mass upsurges and revolutionary crisis, when it becomes possible to carve out contestational space within bourgeois society, such as the Soviets in Russia, serving the very insurrectional politics (as he calls it) that Badiou has rejected. Badiou is speaking about something else, about “points of autonomy” within societies ruled by a reactionary state power, absent the perspective of the revolutionary seizure of power.

We have to more deeply examine Badiou’s construct of “politics at a distance from the state”: its assumptions, its illusions, and the ground on which such politics could only operate.

The root problem with Badiou’s political orientation of durable “independence and autonomy” from the bourgeois state is its failure to grasp the integrative unity of bourgeois capitalist society and the ways in which the bourgeois state permeates all of society. Which is to say, bourgeois class power and bourgeois economic relations, and the ideological influences that correspond to those relations, pervade the space (or “spaces”) of capitalist society.

Badiou has written about the “creation of a space of autonomy in the factories [with] the objective ... not to take power, to replace an existing power, but to force the state to invent a new relation with the workers.”<sup>111</sup> But what kinds of “new relations” is he imagining?

On the one hand, it is not possible *within* capitalist society to establish an alternative mode of production, to put an end to the exploitation of wage labor and create a planned economy based on social need (a point which Badiou will occasionally acknowledge). Socialism is indeed the only alternative to capitalism; but it can only be established, develop, and function systemically—on the basis of the socialization of ownership of the means of production and the leadership and coordinating role of a new state power.

On the other hand, any truly transformational politics is going to bring you into collision and antagonism with the existing bourgeois state. Mao’s famously provocative statement about the Paris Commune is rather apt in this regard: “If the Paris Commune had not failed but had been successful, then in my opinion, it would have become by now a bourgeois commune. This is because it was impossible for the French bourgeoisie to allow France’s working class to have so much political power.”

Badiou can advocate for, and may even find, some “space” within the existing system and state power, because his politics of equality is not transformational; it does not stand in fundamental antagonism to bourgeois relations.

As for notions of “worker cooperatives” within capitalist society (a politics echoed in the perspectives of people like Naomi Klein), any such sites would be interacting with the larger capitalist economy of society and the imperialist world economy. They would not be able to free themselves from surrounding commodity relations: at the level of input and exchange requirements, competitive pressures, and ideological influences (the narrowing perspective of “my/our” production unit, etc.). Badiou “subtracts” economics from his politics and autonomous spaces.

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111. Ibid., p. 654.

The repressive force of the bourgeois state—its policing, surveillance, and punitive powers—reach into all zones of modern bourgeois society. The pervasive influence of bourgeois ideology, the shaping of public opinion, the control over the means of disseminating ideas—all this too is part of the fabric of bourgeois society.

Is this to say that all resistance is futile, or that it is impossible to build a revolutionary movement in bourgeois society? No, of course not. But resistance is struggle, and spaces of resistance—which *are* possible and desirable—will collide with the repressive powers of bourgeois society. Any revolutionary movement must be forged with full recognition of its fundamental antagonism with the ruling state; it cannot carry on work aimlessly but—particularly in modern capitalist countries—must work with the perspective of accumulating strength to go over to the contest for power at a time when society is convulsed with social crisis and upheaval.

There is political initiative to carve out in bourgeois society, work to prepare minds and organize forces for revolution. There is the relative autonomy of the ideological arena, wherein bourgeois ideas are the ruling ideas but oppositional ideas do contend and impact society. There is a critical ideological dimension to revolutionary work, and communist ideology must be vigorously and creatively promoted and popularized. But this initiative is forged in political and ideological contestation and confrontation with bourgeois society and rule, not at an illusory distance from the state.

So what, then, does it mean to function “at a distance from the state” in some opposition to the state ... but in non-antagonism to the state? How is this possible, given the repressive force of the bourgeois state? It can only mean a politics of autonomy informed by a calculus of playing within the rules and parameters of the existing order. To do otherwise would be to invite reaction, forcing the constriction and contraction of such spaces. To be (and stay) at some non-antagonistic political distance from the state requires the self-imposition of constraint—a kind of internalization of the dictates of bourgeois power.

Badiou is not wholly unaware of the kinds of contradictions we have been identifying, and how this does indeed delimit a sustainable politics. He takes refuge—and this is consistent with his view of equality as subjective engagement—in the notion that this kind of politics exists as idea and subjective impulse:

There is certainly a ‘doing’ [*faire*] of politics, but it is immediately the pure and simple experience of a thought, its localization. It cannot be distinguished from it.<sup>112</sup>

The pivotal question is how can anything truly emancipatory and transformative occur or be brought about without the strategic orientation of destroying these “dominant” relations? How can the process of “subtraction” that creates this “distance” from the state, these points and

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112. Quoted in Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 224.

spaces of “autonomy,” be emancipatory when Alain Badiou talks about leaving reactionary relations intact?

Freedom lies in the recognition and transformation of necessity. It has to be wrenched out of necessity, through struggle. It is objectively the case that there can be no emancipation without opposing and ultimately defeating and abolishing reactionary material forces and relations. Alain Badiou wishes to circumvent all of this.

The politics of genuine emancipation is a politics of confronting and transforming all of social reality—all of its oppressive and exploitative relations—not “subtracting” out of that reality, ideologically ensconced in safe sites of “autonomy and independence” in fundamental coexistence with bourgeois society.

***Maoist Base Areas and Soviets: at a “Distance From The State” or Oriented Towards New State Power?***

Badiou has tried to bolster his case by interpreting the experience of the base areas in pre-1949 China and the Soviets of pre-October 1917 in Russia through the filter of “politics at a distance from the state.” He explains:

Egalitarian logic can only begin when the State is configured, put at a distance, measured... [I]t is necessary to work *locally*, in the gap opened up between politics and the State... This is how a Maoist politics was able to experiment with an agrarian revolution in the liberated zones (those beyond the reach of the reactionary armies), or a Bolshevik politics was able to effect a partial transfer of certain statist operations into the hands of the Soviets, at least in those instances where the latter were capable of assuming them....works to produce equality under the conditions of freedom of thought/practice opened up the fixation of statist power.<sup>113</sup> [emphasis in original]

...But what is the moment of freedom in politics? *It is the one wherein the State is put at a distance*.... Our two examples show that this notation has had singular names: ‘Soviets’ during the Bolshevik revolution, ‘liberated zones’ during the Maoist process. But democracy has had many other names in the past. It has some in the present (for example: ‘gathering of the Organization Politique and of the collective of illegal immigrant workers from the hostels’), and it will have others in the future.<sup>114</sup> [emphasis ours]

Badiou distorts the historical experience of the Maoist base areas and the Soviets in order to force-fit these genuinely emancipatory episodes into his paradigm.

Fundamentally, the Maoist base areas of the 1930s and 1940s and the Soviets in Russia were about *state power*, about which class held the monopoly of legitimate armed force, about the

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113. Badiou, *Metapolitics*, pp. 149-50.

114. *Ibid.*, pp. 151-52.

replacement of reactionary state power with proletarian state power. Further, *vanguard communist leadership*, of the Chinese Communist Party under Mao and the Bolsheviks under Lenin, played a critical role in the establishment of these forms of power. That—the “party-state”—was their fundamental essence. This is an essential truth obliterated by Alain Badiou.

“Maoist liberated zones” were “*liberated*”; i.e., the reactionary armies were driven out, and replaced by embryonic proletarian (or new-democratic) state power. Mao in “Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War,” defines base areas as “the strategic bases on which the guerrilla forces rely in performing their strategic tasks and achieving the object of preserving and expanding themselves and destroying and driving out the enemy.”<sup>115</sup>

It was only in this context of “*destroying and driving out the enemy*” that the agrarian revolution and other aspects of the new-democratic revolution could be implemented. Badiou completely omits this, portraying these base areas merely as “those beyond the reach of the reactionary armies.” How did they get “beyond the reach of the reactionary armies”? By the wave of a magic wand? By “the pure and simple experience of a thought”?

The agrarian revolution was the site of tremendous class struggle, against feudal reactionary elements, big landlords and their allies. Without “*destroying and driving out the enemy*,” and without establishing the dominance of the revolutionary army and power, there would be no possibility of “experiment[ing] with an agrarian revolution in the liberated zones.” An agrarian revolution is a “revolution,” a transfer of power from the feudal classes to those they have exploited, in conjunction with the forcible appropriation of land from the big landlords and its redistribution among the peasants. How on earth would this be possible without “*destroying and driving out the enemy*”?!<sup>116</sup>

This was hardly politics “at a distance from the state,” as Badiou claims, but rather revolutionary emancipatory politics in radical opposition to and liberated from the reactionary state—prefiguring the new-democratic state throughout the country as a whole. The base areas were “destructive” of and “antagonistic” to the old state power, and were “militarized” in defense of this new power, and guided by the aim of creating revolutionary state power in the country as a whole. Further, “a Maoist politics was able to experiment with an agrarian revolution in the liberated zones,” precisely because of the leadership of Mao and the Chinese Communist Party.

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115. Mao Tsetung, “Problems of Strategy in Guerrilla War,” *Selected Works of Mao Tsetung*, Vol. II (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1965), p. 93.

116. Badiou has to contort his argument about the base areas in revolutionary China as illustrating his notion of a “subtraction” from state power, as his accounting bears no relation to Mao’s line and practice. He acknowledges that these base areas had to be defended by a revolutionary army (which was, in fact, the embryo of the popular armed force of a new state power!). Badiou writes: “It is necessary, then to have a new articulation of the destructive and subtractive parts of negation, so that the destruction or violence appears in the form of protective force, capable of defending something created through a movement of subtraction. This idea was probably already present in the figure of the revolutionary ‘base’ during the Chinese revolution. Mao wrote things like this concerning the role of the army, *even if he also developed a strategy that was still oriented toward the seizure of State power*” (Del Lucchese and Smith, “We Need a Popular Discipline,” Interview with Alain Badiou, p. 654; emphasis ours). One cannot, and Mao did not, sever the base areas from the overall goal of the seizure of state power. For Mao, they were indissolubly connected. To occasionally acknowledge this essential connection, only to ignore or dismiss it as Badiou does, severs this crucial link, in theory and practice.

To continue: What, in regard to these liberated areas, is “*the object of preserving and expanding themselves*,” if not to serve the ultimate goal of seizure of nationwide state power? The base areas, which were fluid (created, defended, defeated and at times created and defended again), were nonetheless instrumentalities of the “strategic tasks” of the revolution. They were never “ends” unto themselves, as Badiou tends to portray them. Again, these were not liberated zones the purpose of which was simply to function “at a distance from the state”—but base areas of revolution against the existing reactionary state and for the nationwide seizure of state power. They were base areas with the leadership of the “insurrectional form of the party.”

In sum, contrary to Badiou’s thesis, the revolutionary rural base areas in China showed that, no “new space of independence or autonomy” from the reactionary state that is radically transformative (a) could be carved out without being “destructive, antagonistic or militarized” against the existing reactionary state power, or (b) could be viable for any length of time without aiming for the full destruction of the reactionary state power and the establishment of a socialist state.

Badiou similarly distorts the experience of the Soviets (the worker councils) that existed in major Russian cities in the run-up to the October Revolution of 1917. He argues that “a Bolshevik politics was able to effect a partial transfer of certain statist operations into the hands of the Soviets, at least in those instances where the latter were capable of assuming them.” Contrast this with Lenin’s definition, offered at the time of the insurrection that launched the October Revolution: “the Soviets are the Russian form of the proletarian dictatorship”—and the aim was the dictatorship of the proletariat, not Soviets as such.

In fact, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had to wage intense ideological struggle with opportunists, from Karl Kautsky<sup>117</sup> to the Mensheviks in Russia itself, who had a very different view of the Soviets. These forces wanted the Soviets to be precisely what Badiou describes: semi-permanent zones of dual power in the context of bourgeois rule. While the Soviets were creations of the masses, they were also sites of fierce struggle between different political forces representing different class interests: in particular there was intense struggle between the reformist and economist program of the Mensheviks and the revolutionary program of the Bolsheviks and Lenin.

Lenin never viewed the Soviets in formalistic terms as pure worker creations; he recognized the class and ideological struggle within them and their changing role under changing circumstances. In October, before and during the insurrection, Lenin viewed them as key instruments for the

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117. Karl Kautsky was a leader of the German Social-Democratic Party and a highly influential “Marxist” theoretician of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Kautsky stood for a reformist and chauvinist workers movement. He posited that imperialism is a particular policy of a particular fraction of the bourgeoisie; that imperial colonization could be supported insofar as it developed the productive forces of the colonized countries; that capitalism could evolve in a more rational and less bellicose way that could work to the advantage of the workers movement, obviating the need for the revolutionary conquest of state power; and, notoriously, advocated that workers unite with the imperialist bourgeoisies of “their” respective countries during World War I. In short, Kautsky denied the irreconcilable antagonism between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Lenin polemicized widely against Kautsky.

seizure of power—for establishing and consolidating a new proletarian state. This was in opposition to the Mensheviks’ program of turning them into mass social-democratic organizations, severed from the goal of revolution and the seizure of state power.

In attempting to recast the Soviets as institutions or zones “at a distance from the state,” rather than what they were—standing in radical opposition to the reactionary state and serving as organs for the revolutionary seizure of power—Badiou is resurrecting the program of the Mensheviks.

In the period just prior to the October Revolution, when the question of proletarian state power and whether the revolutionaries would go for the full seizure of power was the question of the moment, Lenin wrote this in regard to the Soviets:

The crux is: should the Soviets aspire to become state organizations (in April 1917 the Bolsheviks put forward the slogan: “All Power to the Soviets!” and at the Bolshevik Party Conference...they declared they were not satisfied with a bourgeois parliamentary republic but demanded a workers’ and peasants’ republic of the Paris Commune or Soviet type); *or* should the Soviets not strive for this, refrain from *taking power into their hands*, refrain from becoming state organizations and remain the “combat organizations” of one “class” (as Martov expressed it, embellishing by this innocent wish the fact that under Menshevik leadership the Soviets were an instrument for the subjection of the workers to the bourgeoisie. [Martov was a leading Menshevik at the time – ed.]<sup>118</sup>

Lenin then argues, in very concise terms, that, “The state is nothing but a machine for the suppression of one class by another,”<sup>119</sup> and goes on to characterize the reformist position of Karl Kautsky:

Thus, the oppressed class, the vanguard of all the working and exploited people in modern society must strive towards the “decisive battles between capital and labor” *but must not touch* the machine by which capital suppresses labor!—*It must not break up* that machine!—*It must not make use* of its all-embracing organization *for suppressing the exploiters!*<sup>120</sup> [emphasis in original]

At this stage, Lenin saw the Soviets as instruments for the seizure of power and as decisive organizations of the new state power. But Lenin also learned and summed up that socialism, which involves the complex tasks of revolutionizing society, could not be led through the institutional form of Soviets, even while, as “special institutions” “of a new type,” they performed critical functions of government and the exercise of state power. Lenin evaluated that the institutionalized leadership of a revolutionary vanguard, made up of those with a revolutionary communist ideological and political outlook and orientation, was needed to lead

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118. Lenin, “Proletarian Revolution and Renegade Kautsky,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 28 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), p. 259.

119. *Ibid.*, p. 260.

120. *Ibid.*

socialist society through the complex tasks of transformation. Old state structures had to be smashed, and the Soviets prefigured the new; but the Soviets, or a network of Soviets, did not have sufficient ideological and political unity, coherence, and strength to lead the thoroughgoing revolutionary transformation of society.

The reasons for this are, in a basic and fundamental sense, the same as detailed in Chapter 4 in relation to why the Shanghai Commune was not a correct form at that stage of the socialist transition in China.

### *A Trajectory of Reformism and Social-Chauvinism*

Where has Alain Badiou traveled, where has his “politics at a distance from the state” brought him? He tells of his new thinking:

Today however, now that “the age of revolutions is over...I have been obliged to change my position as regards the state. The guiding principle can no longer be, in a unilateral way, ‘destatification.’ It is a matter more of prescribing the state, often in a logic of reinforcement. The problem is to know *from where* politics prescribes the state.<sup>121</sup> [emphasis in original]

Elsewhere he elaborates:

Politics unfolded according to the interests of the masses, and the state was the external adversary. ... *Today our point of view is quite different...* what we would say now is that there are a certain number of questions regarding which we cannot posit the absolute exteriority of the state. It is rather a matter of requiring something from the state, of formulating with respect to the state a certain number of prescriptions or statements... [emphasis ours]

Continuing:

It is rather a matter of requiring something from the state, of formulating with respect to the state a certain number of prescriptions or statements... to create the conditions in which the state is led to change this or that thing concerning them, to repeal the laws that should be appealed, to take the measures...that should be taken. This is what we mean by *prescriptions against the state*. This is not to say that we participate in the state. We remain outside the electoral system, outside any party representation. But we include the state within our political field, to the extent that, on a number of essential points, we have to work more through prescriptions against the state than in any radical exteriority to the state.<sup>122</sup> [emphasis in original]

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121. Quoted in Hallward, *Badiou*, pp. 226-27.

122. Badiou and Hallward, “Politics and Philosophy: An Interview with Alain Badiou,” Appendix in *Ethics, An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* (London: Verso, 2001), pp. 96-98.



This is the painful political and ideological point of arrival of Alain Badiou's radical politics of emancipation. He draws the wrong conclusions and lessons from the first wave of socialist revolutions and societies; he proceeds to declare that "the age of revolutions is over"; and he advances a politics "for which state power is neither the objective nor the norm." But reality impinges on the illusion, and despite efforts to reduce this politics to a purely subjective experience, Alain Badiou finds himself in close proximity to the state, a supplicant for "prescriptions" for reform. Yes, there is still a small measure of distance—Badiou continues to reject elections and parliaments. But with his ideological and political line, Badiou objectively accommodates to the premises, constraints, and confines of bourgeois democracy.

What remains is the hollow shell of a politics which somehow stands in some relation to a dubious and tenuous "communist hypothesis" but which, in his words, "promises nothing. It is both without party and without program. It is a prescriptive form of thought..."<sup>123</sup>

And the world stays fundamentally unchanged. Capitalism-imperialism continues humming in the "background," crushing lives and destroying spirits in its meat-grinder of exploitation. And the horrors continue unabated.

What is radical about this reformism? What is emancipatory about this, or any reformism?

To cast the imperialist state as the receptor and receptacle of "prescriptions," and to argue for non-antagonism towards it, is to accept and reinforce the imperialist status quo. It is to proceed from the standpoint of "our country"—what is feasible and acceptable within its frame. It is—and this need not involve conscious intent—to rationalize a politics that can go no further than aiming for better terms within the imperialist citadels themselves—leaving intact the nexus of exploitative and parasitic relations. And here is the irony: the very space for an illusory "radical" politics at a "distance from the state" is a product of the exploitative relations and associated privileges deriving in large measure from the larger imperialist-dominated lopsidedness of the world.

Alain Badiou is known to identify with the wretched of the earth; has consistently taken the right position in defending the rights of "*sans-papiers*," the undocumented immigrants of France; is known to be against the wars of imperialist aggression. But by rejecting the very goals and the very instrumentalities that make possible a revolutionary rupture from imperialism—a rupture that would put an end to all of these horrors and begin a process of genuine emancipation in the service of world humanity—Alain Badiou can only turn inwards to a paltry reformism which is objectively predicated on the very existence, nature, and role of imperialism. Regardless of intent, Alain Badiou has landed himself in a very unpleasant space: "Eurocentric social-chauvinism and social democracy."<sup>124</sup>

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123. Quoted in Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 227.

124. Avakian, *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will*, published as *Revolution* #51, 1981. (revcom.us). In Section III, *Leninism as the Bridge*.

## Alain Badiou and “The Event”—Radical Rupture or (Not So) Radical Tailing of Spontaneity?

Alain Badiou’s notion of the “event” is among his most widely known and widely discussed concepts. For many progressive and radical readers of his work, the event has come to signify the possibility of emancipatory breaks in the status quo. It has also come to signify a central role for “the subject” who stays faithful to the event and soldiers through for the realization of new possibilities opened up by this radical break.

In a nutshell, Alain Badiou’s event in the political sphere is an eruption or rupture<sup>125</sup> of maximal social intensity that is wholly unexpected and unexplainable in its origins and outbreak—“pure chance,” in Badiou’s words—and something that opens up radical “new” potential. An event may be a spontaneous mass upsurge like May ’68 in France (involving wide-scale street protests and fighting with police, takeovers of schools and factories and a general strike), or a revolutionary moment like the Paris Commune or the October Revolution in Russia in 1917. Pivotal for Badiou, the event has a profound egalitarian character and content.

The event is also defined by the fact that it gives rise to and is intertwined with a new “truth” and a new “subject,” both constituted retrospectively (after) the event. Thus the event gives rise to a truth-process: The new subject and new truth do not exist objectively but rather are constructed in relation to the event through “fidelity” (loyalty and faith) to the event.

Badiou cites the resurrection of Christ as a canonical event. Paul and Christianity constitute, in turn, the subject and the truth in fidelity to this event. In the political realm, the great upheaval that shook France in May 1968 would be another canonical example, bursting forth unexpectedly with radically new possibilities (with Badiou, himself, being a subject formed in fidelity to this event).

Alain Badiou’s method of formalism—whereby radical differences in content are obscured under formalistic constructs—is wildly at play in his conception of the event, as is obvious with such examples as the resurrection of Christ, the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, October 1917, and May ’68.<sup>126</sup>

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125. Badiou uses the mathematical term of a singularity, which, translated to popular language, would convey the characteristics of being (a) singular (unique, exceptional, rare), and (b) occurring at a specific point where the status quo has been breached, as in a discontinuity in a mathematical function or a black hole in the space-time fabric.

126. The resurrection of Christ and its “subject” of Paul, if one “buys” Badiou’s interpretation, led to the first universalism—the “truth” of Christianity, an oppressive religion that has caused great harm for centuries, a weight and shackle on the masses consciously knowing and changing the world, on approaching the world scientifically and fighting for their emancipation.

As spoken to earlier, the French Revolution was a thoroughgoing bourgeois revolution; the Paris Commune the first experience of state power in the hands of the masses aiming for a society without exploitation; October 1917 the first proletarian revolution with the necessary leadership, theory, and instrumentalities to unleash millions to make revolution, and to establish and consolidate socialist society as transition to communism; and May ’68 a righteous upsurge of the students and workers of Paris, which was constrained and aborted in its revolutionary possibilities by the lack of revolutionary leadership, and thus had little chance for a full rupture with the status quo. All of this is lumped together under the construct of an event.

For all the disparate examples, the Paris Commune does for Badiou play a special role as illustration and yardstick of what constitutes an event and how this fits into a politics of emancipation:

I believe this other world [the path for emancipation going forward – ed.] resides for us in the Commune, yet altogether elsewhere than in its subsequent existence, what I have called its *first* existence, that is, in the party-state and its social worker referent. Instead, it exists in the observation that a political rupture is always a combination of a subjective capacity and an organization—totally independent of state—of the consequences of that capacity.<sup>127</sup> [emphasis in original, underscoring ours]

The Commune, for Badiou, epitomized certain qualities and features. It was an unexpected mass upsurge. It was a rupture with the existing French bourgeois state that led to a new political form that did not consolidate and concentrate political-military power. All this embodied politics at a “distance from state” and “politics without party.” Here we are back to the rejection of the party-state: this is central to and virtually definitional of Badiou’s conception of the event and its corresponding politics. Further, the Commune gave birth to new “subjects,” notably the communards themselves, and the international communist movement that derived inspiration from it.

Alain Badiou’s philosophical trinity of “event-subject-truth” has excited interest for affirming radical change and introducing a novel approach to the dynamics of such change that seemingly puts the conscious subject back on center-stage. This is said to stand in contrast to structural-determinist theories of change that underemphasize the role of consciousness and subject. For these reasons, the event is seen in some progressive circles as “an expression of the counter-view that a substantially better world inspired by radically novel events in various domains is possible, and depends for its realization on the energy and commitment of forward-looking people.”<sup>128</sup>

Reality cries out for a “substantially better world.” Poverty, misery, desperation, repression and violence swell the ranks of the “wretched of the earth.” However, once again, Alain Badiou’s event, and especially his conception of the “subject” combined with an explicit rejection of the “party-state,” offers no real alternative to the system that produces this world of oppression.

### ***Badiou’s Event as Pure Chance***

Alain Badiou presents the event as “pure chance, which cannot be inferred from the situation”<sup>129</sup>—“absolute contingency,”<sup>130</sup> as Oliver Feltham, a Badiou scholar, describes it. In

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127. Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 289.

128. Nick Hewlett, *Badiou, Balibar, Ranciere, Re-thinking Emancipation* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 37.

129. Badiou, *L’Être et l’événement [Being and Event]* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), p.215, as translated by Peter Hallward in “Generic Sovereignty: the philosophy of Alain Badiou,” *Angelaki*, Vol. 3, No. 3, p. 95. In the English language edition of *Being and Event*, this phrase has been translated as “purely hazardous, and which cannot be inferred from the situation”. Badiou likens the event to the casting of dice for this “gesture symbolizes the event in general.” In English language translations of Badiou’s work, the words “chance,” “fortuitous,” and “hazardous”

other words, the event is something absolutely new and “beyond” what can be explained as an outcome of prior conditions and contradictions. For this reason, the event is also unexpected. Badiou has stated: “it is the essence of the event not to be preceded by any sign, and to surprise us by its grace, however vigilant we may be.... “The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night.”<sup>131</sup>

Alain Badiou is theorizing, and celebrating, an aspect of the dynamics of “the objective” situation—the fact that deep and profound social contradictions of the system often result in intense, spontaneous, and unexpected eruptions. The “immediate triggers” and subsequent dynamics of such eruptions are often not foreseeable and may not be *directly* related to the major, underlying contradictions. And even when underlying causes and triggers can be recognized, the intensity of these situations often cannot be anticipated, much less precisely predicted. For example, May ’68 in France, the student uprising in Mexico at the time of the 1968 Olympics, or the Los Angeles rebellion in 1992—all had triggering elements and dynamics reflecting and giving expression to major concentrations of social contradictions; yet what happened was nevertheless unexpected, both in its ferocity and in the novel forms of struggle, organization, and consciousness which emerged from these conjunctures.

Few would dispute the elements of suddenness and surprise of these situations; and these qualities cannot be mechanically reduced to underlying material causes. This is important. The communist movement has been marked, and blinkered, historically by a tendency to linearly project the future out of whatever set of contradictions presents itself at any given time, to fail to see the possibility of leaps and ruptures in development, and to be unable to imagine the fact that new possibilities can very suddenly and “without warning” open up. Forging a better understanding of the dialectical link between causality and accident is a very important philosophical challenge. But Alain Badiou seeks to completely detach the event from these causes, casting this event in the ethereal glow of “pure chance.” This might seem, on first glance, to “liberate” the subjective; in fact, as we shall see, it ends by fastening the chains of determinism still tighter on those who would act to bring about fundamental change.

Everything in nature, and society, is a product of causality and contingency (chance), of necessity and accident. In treating these events as “pure chance,” Alain Badiou negates the element of causality—the historical, material, and social antecedents of these events. This stands in opposition to a scientific conception of and approach to society and the possibility of its transformation, rooted in a scientific analysis and synthesis of the underlying structures and dynamics of development. The 17<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Spinoza defined a miracle as “an event of which the causes cannot be explained.”<sup>132</sup> But what appears as a “miracle”—including the “miracle” of the event—has both material determinants and antecedents at many levels, along with, and interacting with, the role of accident. And there are the event’s human actors who are

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have been used interchangeably.

130. Oliver Feltham in “Translator’s Preface” in Badiou, *Being and Event*, p xxvi; Also in Feltham, *Alain Badiou, Live Theory* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 100.

131. Badiou, *Saint Paul, The Foundation of Universalism* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 111.

132. Benedictus de Spinoza, *A Theologico-Political Treatise, and a Political Treatise* (NY: Cosimo Classics, 2007), p. 84.

part of historically specific class and social forces, responding to and acting on the event, and its antecedent conditions, towards different outcomes.

There are many examples of sharp turns in history and contemporary society where the deep contradictions of the system erupt in unexpected and seismic ways. But if society cannot be reduced to a linear and mechanical unfolding of cause and effect, neither can it be reduced to a random series of events. An observation by Lenin made at the time of the 1917 February Revolution in Russia is quite relevant:

There are no miracles in nature or history, but every abrupt turn in history, and this applies to every revolution, presents such a wealth of content, unfolds such unexpected and specific combinations of forms of struggle and alignment of forces of the contestants, that to the lay mind there is much that must appear miraculous.<sup>133</sup>

There are strong elements of chance and contingency in that “hot mix” of factors that result in the event, especially in how these elements mutually interact and come together and how new things come into being. But reality is not all accident: there is also relative stability and unity; and forms and patterns of particular forms of matter in motion, including in human society, can be identified and understood. There are also underlying social contradictions, including but not limited to key economic developments, changes in class relations, emergent political, social, and cultural phenomena, etc., that shape the development of a social formation and the overall situation. There is much that can and should be understood, anticipated, and worked on by conscious revolutionary forces, exactly in order to maximize advances for the revolutionary struggle, including towards the seizure of power—if the conditions come into being that can enable revolutionary forces to “wrench” a revolutionary opening out of situations of great upheaval. And, in regard to the many things that happen that are unanticipated—well, revolutionary forces have to be, as Bob Avakian has put it, “constantly tense to that possibility while consistently working to transform necessity into freedom.”<sup>134</sup> This is the correct dialectical materialist understanding of reality—and an active, transformative, revolutionary orientation based on that.

Badiou’s focus on the event may at first seem to be a way out of the thicket of “determinist realism” identified above. But Badiou in fact resorts to a simple negation of causality, rather than a recasting of the relationship between accident and causality in a way that more accurately reflects the patterns of how reality develops.

### ***Passivity and Spontaneity Versus Hastening While Awaiting: the Objective and Subjective Factors***

So, at a time when the world seems to be descending into ever greater catastrophe and horror, and when radical possibilities seem bleak, Alain Badiou offers us the secular miracle of the

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133. Lenin, “Letters from Afar,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), p. 297.

134. Avakian, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” in the pamphlet *Revolution and Communism: A Foundation and Strategic Orientation* (May 1, 2008), p. 41. (revcom.us)

event. This is the hope and possibility of a *deus ex machina* that will “rescue” us from the oppressive present.

In the imperialist citadels, it is generally the case that relative stability characterizes the situation in normal times, which is different from the situation in the oppressed nations. Badiou’s event resonates with those yearning for a break in imperialist society’s deadening and stultifying normalcy. A snap in this fabric, an event, including and especially spontaneous mass upsurges, is—and understandably so—appealing to all those who want a different world, and who hunger for such exceptional moments when things are thrown open and new possibilities and new capabilities emerge.

But Badiou takes the normalcy of imperialist society as cause for quietism. All Badiou asks of the “subject”-to-be (because it is the “event” that creates the conditions for the creation of a subject) is to have faith in this miracle. Implicitly this involves waiting for the event, and explicitly this involves faith and loyalty (“fidelity”) in the wake of it. Until then, as we saw in Chapter 4, a reformist politics of tinkering on the margins and making “prescriptions” to the imperialist state is all that can be done.

What is in common between those reformist politics of non-“evental” life in the metropolises and Badiou’s approach to the event is that, in both, the subject and the subjective factor can only trail in the wake of events and are ultimately severed from the revolutionary goal of the seizure of state power. His is not a conscious, revolutionary subject but one formed in the wake of the event, and essentially “tailing” spontaneously. This “subject” is not actively working on and transforming the pre-“evental” situation, or working on the event itself, guided by revolutionary aims and seeking to make the greatest gains for the revolutionary struggle.

Badiou’s logic of the “subject” waiting for the event begets a determinism premised on the principle that the “subject” and consciousness cannot affect, shape, and transform the larger objective situation. In fact, Badiou enshrines this as principle:

[Politics indifferent to the] “dialectic of the objective and subjective ... the deployment of subjective thought should take place from within the subjective itself, through the hypothesis of the foundation of the subjective in the subjective and *not in the confrontation of the subjective to the objective*” [let alone in] “*reference to the economy, the state, alienation, etc.*”<sup>135</sup> [emphasis ours, words in brackets from Hallward]

Let’s first, from a scientific Marxist perspective, define some critical terms. The larger objective factor refers to the material conditions of society and their underlying dynamics, the broader political and ideological currents that are swirling in relation to—and in some ways autonomous of—that; the (contradictory) directions in which all these are moving and changing; the moods, sentiments, and ideas of different sections of the people; and so on. The subjective factor refers to those seeking to transform the objective situation, whether the revolutionary party or a broader movement.

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135. Quoted in Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 224.

Badiou effectively negates the relationship between the objective and subjective factors—making an absolute out of the boundaries between the two and promoting a passive attitude towards the objective factor, a view that what is must of necessity be and cannot be shaped, influenced, and transformed towards revolutionary goals by the subjective factor. This is what underlies Badiou’s absence of the “subject” prior to the event. Without the *deus ex machina* of the event, there can be no essential change in the objective situation.

This is perhaps ironic because there is in Badiou a great emphasis on the importance of the subjective—and there *are* things to criticize in the history of the communist movement, in tendencies toward mechanical materialism, and a kind of “inevitabilism” in “history’s course,” an underestimation of the subjective factor and, thus, a determinism in those forms. But Badiou’s approach lands, too, in determinism—through a separation of objective and subjective in a different form.

Let’s discuss the relationship between objective and subjective a bit more. The objective factor, or situation, is principal overall. It is the framework—a dynamic one, but nonetheless the framework—that sets certain constraints, even as those constraints are fluid, relative, and themselves ever-changing. But fluid as they are, they still exist, and so voluntarism—the idea that mere will and action can effect change, independently of and without regard to the objective conditions—is wrong. But the actual relation between the objective situation and the subjective factor is dialectical—with the two interpenetrating and mutually transforming each other, including the ability of the conscious actions of the people to react back upon and transform the objective situation. Both the objective situation and consciousness are, contrary to Badiou’s assertion, transformed through “*the confrontation of the subjective to the objective.*”

Badiou idealizes the “subject” as a self-construction and detaches the subjective from ongoing interaction and “confrontation” with the objective factor. In reality, consciousness, like the objective situation, is a form of matter in motion, with the crucial difference being the ability of human beings to learn about and act consciously to change the larger objective world. The boundaries between the objective and subjective are real, but relative and conditional; the “objective” situation is not wholly external to, but can be influenced, shaped, and even transformed by, the subjective.

In terms of a correct understanding of the relationship between the objective and subjective, Bob Avakian has formulated it this way:

... although changes in what’s objective for us [the subjective factor, the conscious revolutionary forces – ed.] won’t come entirely, or perhaps not even mainly, through our “working on” the objective conditions (in some direct, one-to-one sense), nevertheless our “working on” them can bring about certain changes within a given framework of objective conditions *and*—in conjunction with and as part of a “mix,” together with many other elements, including other forces acting on the objective situation from their own viewpoints—this can, under certain circumstances, be part of the coming together of factors which *does* result

in a qualitative change. And, again, it is important to emphasize that nobody can know exactly how all that will work out.<sup>136</sup> [emphasis in original]

Proceeding from a scientific understanding of the dialectical relationship between the subjective and the objective factors leads to an orientation of:

*... constantly straining against the limits of the objective framework and seeking to transform the objective conditions to the maximum degree possible at any given time, always being tense to the possibility of different things coming together which bring about (or make possible the bringing about of) an actual qualitative rupture and leap in the objective situation. So that is a point of basic orientation in terms of applying materialism and dialectics, in hastening while awaiting the emergence of a revolutionary situation.*<sup>137</sup> [last emphasis added]

A revolutionary situation is one in which society is in the throes of a profound crisis, marked by characteristics and criteria, identified by Lenin, that are necessary and essential for any potential seizure of power, particularly in imperialist countries: (a) the ruling class is enmeshed in a profound crisis and cannot rule in the old way, (b) the contradictions among the ruling class give openings to the outrage of the masses, who are now unwilling to live in the old way, and (c) there is a revolutionary vanguard which has been consistently working to build influence and organized ties and which is capable of giving expression to the sentiments and determination of the masses to bring about a radical rupture with the system.

Upsurges like those defined as events by Badiou can hold within them potentially constitutive elements of a revolutionary situation. But the task of revolutionaries is not to passively await—but rather to “hasten while awaiting”—the emergence of such a revolutionary situation, which comes about “as a result of the unfolding of the contradictions of the system itself, as well as the political and ideological work of the revolutionaries.”<sup>138</sup>

This includes raising the ideological and political consciousness of masses of people through a whole ensemble of forms, including consistent ideological work, as well as identifying key faultlines around which mass political resistance to the state can open up questions of legitimacy; it includes strengthening the party in its understanding, its influence, and its numbers (a crucial task, as the strength of the party going into a potential revolutionary situation has everything to do with whether such an opening will be seized, or even recognized); and it includes as well bringing forward a significant section of people from different strata, but including a critical mass within the proletariat, who think and act as “emancipators of humanity,” people imbued with a basic understanding of the long-term goals and outlook of communism. All this is part of “working on” the objective situation, of hastening.

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136. Avakian, “Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity,” p. 40.

137. Ibid.

138. “Some Crucial Points of Revolutionary Orientation—in Opposition to Infantile Posturing and Distortion of Revolution,” Appendix, *Revolution and Communism: A Foundation and Strategic Orientation*, p. 91. (revcom.us)



Further, as Avakian has emphasized, transformation of the objective situation proceeds through many different channels, and does not develop simply in relation to key social contradictions. These channels include the realms of culture and morality and particular concentration points in the struggle over ideas.<sup>139</sup>

Alain Badiou's philosophical approach, with its lack of defining relations between different elements and levels of reality, does not actually reflect reality. Badiou's theory stands as an obstacle to being able to identify particular and various channels and pathways through which it becomes possible to wrench freedom out of necessity—and on that basis to transform the objective situation, especially the ideological and political consciousness of people.

For all his rhapsodizing of the subject, Badiou objectively writes off the dynamic role of the subjective factor, or consciousness. In doing so, Badiou's philosophy and theory of the event succumbs to the relative stability that prevails in the imperialist countries. Passivity in the face of unfavorable objective situations has a deeply corrosive ideological effect. Over time, and almost inevitably, this passivity and determinism ideologically begets the "tolerability of the status quo," as one learns to accept what one cannot fundamentally change ... while waiting for the miracle.

### ***May 1968: What Was and What Might Have Been***

Alain Badiou's inspiration for the event comes from his own personal and direct experience of May '68. He describes the tenor of that moment, when participants were:

...seized by what was happening to them, as by something extraordinary, something properly incalculable ... well beyond what any one person might have thought possible—that's what I call an eventual dimension. None of the little processes that led to the event was equal to what actually took place. ... I simply think that none of the calculations internal to the situation can account for its irruption, and cannot, in particular, elucidate this kind of break in scale that happens at a certain moment, such that the actors themselves are seized by something of which they no longer know if they are its actors or its vehicle [supports], or what carries it away. ...<sup>140</sup> [bracketed word and emphasis from original]

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139. "But, fundamentally (and, so to speak, underneath all this) freedom does lie in the recognition and transformation of necessity. The point is that this recognition and the ability to carry out that transformation goes through a lot of different "channels," and is not tied in a positivist or reductionist or linear way to however the main social contradictions are posing themselves at a given time. If that were the case—or if we approached it that way—we would liquidate the role of art and much of the superstructure in general. Why do we battle in the realm of morals? It is because there is relative initiative and autonomy in the superstructure. And the more correctly that's given expression, the better it will be, in terms of the kind of society we have at a given time and in terms of our ability to recognize necessity and carry out the struggle to transform necessity." [Avakian, "Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity," p.11.]

140. Badiou and Hallward, "Politics and Philosophy," pp. 124-25.

The last phrases here, while evoking the heady and fast-changing spirit and mood of the times, are revealing, with people like Badiou “carried away” by the spontaneity of the moment. This was a moment pregnant with emancipatory possibility. But this was not being acted on—or not being sufficiently acted on—by conscious revolutionary forces, determined to maximize advances towards revolutionary goals.

The righteous rebellion that was May ’68 in France, echoing and reinforcing revolutionary upsurges all over the world, had a powerful effect. At a time of major revolutionary struggles in the oppressed nations of the Third World, it showed—as did the urban rebellions in the U.S. in an even more powerful way—that there were seeds of revolutionary possibility in the imperialist countries themselves. But May ’68 was even more significant for *the possibility of what could have been* but was not. This was an extremely favorable situation of mass upheaval that, with revolutionary leadership, might have opened up radical possibilities, even possibilities for an actual revolutionary transformation in France. The masses were in rebellion and the ruling class in disarray. The sense of permanence and the legitimacy of the ruling social order were being called into serious question.

The “possibility of possibilities” of May ’68 would have been qualitatively greater had a genuine revolutionary vanguard been playing a dynamic, leading role. But this is precisely what Alain Badiou rules out.

Badiou may cast the event as “pure chance,” but there is absolutely nothing “pure” about the “event.” Each class seeks to remake the world in its own image, striving to impose its solutions on the “problem of society” as it perceives and understands it. This is especially so at moments when society is gripped by upheaval and uncertainty. Yes, fissures and eruptions do have an unexpected quality. But they are interacting with a particular social formation, in which different classes, social forces, and their representatives will be contending, with their material, political, and ideological arsenals, to shape and influence the event, as it emerges and as it develops—all with an eye towards outcomes favorable to the class interests they represent.

This emphasis on pure chance and absolute novelty leads Badiou to minimize the influence of class forces other than the proletariat and effectively allows these class forces to reign over the situation, as they spontaneously will, influencing and dictating developments. These are the seeds of defeat. As we have emphasized, the proletariat is the single class whose interests require a persistent struggle against spontaneity. This requires conscious leadership that bases itself on a “total revolution” to emancipate all of humanity. Without this leadership, the proletariat’s interests are suppressed—or in any case remain fundamentally unexpressed.

And one lesson that must be drawn from the events that Badiou enumerates is that a genuinely radical and emancipatory rupture will be opposed by the bourgeoisie—and with the most extreme means and measures. The ruling class will bring forth its armed and repressive forces, its connections within the society and with ruling classes of other countries, and will utilize its control over the means of communication and of influencing and shaping public opinion.

The bourgeoisie will be working to shape developments, attempting through intimidation and deception to win over sections of people, especially among the petite bourgeoisie, which

vacillates and whose own position drives it to seek out a “third way” (between the bourgeoisie and proletariat) reflecting its class outlook and its interests, which are ultimately unrealizable in modern society. The bourgeoisie will call on and utilize the ideological force of habit and spontaneous pulls to “order and stability,” especially among these middle strata. And, as the ruling class did to great effect in France, it will use revisionist parties and organizations to misdirect, to co-opt, and, where necessary, to repress the revolutionary struggle. In the face of this, revolutionary forces must seek to seize, retain, and where necessary re-seize the political and ideological initiative. While France, May ’68 shows that this can go quite far without a party, it shows even more that, in the absence of a vanguard, a potential revolutionary opening can be reduced to a constitutional crisis and reform of the existing bourgeois state.

There are other painful contemporary examples of this kind of maneuvering by the imperialists and other class forces. In the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 against the Shah, amidst a wild mix of contending classes and strata, bourgeois and feudal forces around Khomeini, which ultimately received backing from the U.S. imperialists, moved to take power in the midst of the mass upsurge. This was accomplished through connections in the Iranian military. The U.S. imperialists calculated that, in the immediate crisis situation, it was more acceptable to have Khomeini come to power than to have a continuing and intensifying revolutionary situation.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela was brought to the fore by the Western, especially the U.S. imperialists, and their allies in the South African ruling class, to resolve the struggle against apartheid in a certain framework—again, as a measure to abort the burgeoning revolutionary potential and possibilities.

In neither case were the genuinely revolutionary forces strong and/or clearly oriented enough to bring forward, and rally masses of people sufficiently around, something radically different.

So too in May ’68, Badiou’s prime example of the event. Different class and social forces were responding to events. The revisionist Communist Party of France (PCF), which had nothing in common with revolution and communism, and was actually a bulwark of the status quo and the existing system, and the PCF’s subservient unions representing the labor aristocracy, played a critical role in putting a halter on things and bringing this unprecedented upsurge to a whimpering close. While the students had tremendous revolutionary sentiments, including initially rejecting the legitimizing mechanisms of elections, and while their bold initiative and bravery to a certain extent put revolution “on the map” in France, they were also given to petit-bourgeois illusions about the system, and bourgeois democracy in particular, and susceptible to being influenced by economist lines about the workers and the labor movement. Imagine the difference genuine communist leadership with a fully developed revolutionary line and influence among the masses would have made in leading the students to more fully rupture with bourgeois democracy as a crucial and decisive part of the overall revolutionary struggle.<sup>141</sup>

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141. In speaking of the lack of “genuine communist leadership” in relation to May ’68, we are referring to the fact that while there were Maoist currents and forces trying to apply a revolutionary communist line and which did have influence in some of the May 68 upsurge and its aftermath, these forces were inexperienced and weak and had not themselves forged the all-round understanding and organization necessary to exert revolutionary leadership – indeed, there was no vanguard with a developed line and leadership.

In the final analysis, the proletariat as a class—its strategic and emancipatory interests and program for making revolution and transforming the world—was absent from the stage. Without vanguard leadership, this will always be the case.

This was acutely felt towards the end of May '68 when DeGaulle and Pompidou, the two top ruling political officials of France, and the French ruling class as a whole, rallied to bring the event to a close and absorb it back into the fabric of French society. The revisionist PCF and its affiliated union CGT negotiated an agreement with Pompidou to bring a national strike to an end (extracting higher wages as a sop to workers) and went along with elections (to defuse the situation). DeGaulle issued multiple calls for a return to “public order.” Pompidou displayed the troops which remained fiercely loyal to the state. The way in which this resolution of the event came together led prominent conservative intellectual Raymond Aron to comment in one of the country’s major papers, *Le Figaro*, that this was a “victory of the party of order, which is broader than the Gaullist party.”<sup>142</sup>

### ***October 1917 and May 1968: the Decisive Role of Leadership***

Alain Badiou writes out of his equation the principal and critical factor that is needed to “conquer” the circumstances, to grab hold of the event and bring about a radically different world in and through this tumult: revolutionary communist leadership, concentrated in the line and leadership of a vanguard party with its sights set firmly on state power. “Taking it all the way” through the ebbs and flows of such an upsurge, the twists and turns, requires leadership firmly oriented towards a different future, a radically different society with a radically new and different state power.

One cannot linearly compare the situation—and the outcomes—in October 1917 in Russia (which Badiou also considers to be an “event”) and May '68 in France. But there *are* profoundly important lessons to be drawn from the presence of a revolutionary leadership in Russia—in a complex and intense situation, with the potential for very different outcomes.

Here, it is important to say a few things about the objective situation in Russia at the time of the revolution. Russia on the eve of the revolution was in many ways a flashpoint of international contradictions. The reality, and the horrors, of World War 1 loomed large: in how it weakened the old order, caused enormous dislocations and suffering within Russian society, affected the military, and in other ways. This war was profoundly shaping of the situation within Russia. Neither the war nor its effects on Russian society “came out of nowhere.” This was a product of inter-imperial rivalries and tensions. These factors were knowable, and as the war progressed, events and the possible and likely pathways of development, and revolutionary possibility, could be analyzed and assessed. Lenin was doing just that.

At the same time, nobody could have anticipated the exact ways in which this would erupt. Speaking just a month before the initial bursting open of the crisis, the revolution of February 1917 which overthrew the Tsar, Lenin mused in a lecture in Switzerland that “we of the older

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142. Quoted in Jean Lacouture, *DeGaulle, The Ruler 1945-1970* (New York: Norton, 1992), p. 557.

generation may not live to see the decisive battles of this coming revolution.”<sup>143</sup> Writing just days after the February upheavals, Lenin traced the revolution’s rapid success to the “fact that, as a result of an extremely unique historical situation, *absolutely dissimilar currents, absolutely heterogeneous* class interests, *absolutely contrary* political and social striving have *merged*, and in a strikingly ‘harmonious’ manner.”<sup>144</sup> All this was new, and demanded new thinking—and bold initiatives, which Lenin took. But in order to take those initiatives, Lenin had to analytically penetrate to the roots of the seemingly miraculous, in the material contradictions, and to the ways in which the revolutionary movement could seize on those contradictions to bring into being something *really new*—a society without exploitation. In some ways, the war was, as Lenin termed it, a “stage manager” for the Russian Revolution. And he led the Bolsheviks to grasp that, and to “work on” that contradiction in a way that would, in the course of less than a year, win people in their millions to become convinced that only revolution and only the Bolsheviks posed a real way out, a real way forward.

Without Lenin, and his leadership of the Bolshevik party and the revolutionary movement, there would have been no October 1917 revolution and no seizure of power. Apart from Russia, and the Bolsheviks specifically, the moment was characterized by virtually the complete collapse of the communist movement. The parties making up the Second International, with the notable exception of the Bolsheviks (and a few others), ended up supporting their own bourgeoisie in World War 1—instead of following a line of revolutionary defeatism in the inter-imperialist war and aiming to make proletarian revolution against their own ruling classes.

Lenin’s leadership was concentrated in an ideological and political line that polemicized against this collapse and that further deepened scientific understanding of the state, and the need for proletarian revolution. Lenin and the Bolsheviks fought for this line among the masses and, from the standpoint of making revolution, led through the twists and turns of the developing situation and the revolutionary crisis that erupted.

Bourgeois and revisionist accounts often portray the Russian Revolution as a masterful coup—at the right moment against a “weakened reactionary” state—rather than a revolution, in the full meaning and dimensions of that, involving the many twists and turns and the sudden abrupt changes, including the alternation between periods of great upheaval and those of what Lenin described as intense calm: the February Revolution that toppled the Tsar, a period in which large sections of the petite bourgeoisie got swept up in a patriotic war frenzy, coup attempts by reactionary sections of the military, the storming of the Winter Palace and the insurrection that took power, and the civil war that followed (and in which the reactionary counter-revolutionary armies were supported by foreign imperialist forces from many other countries).

Once again, without the leadership of Lenin—his sights set firmly on state power, and the tactics and policies flowing from that strategic objective—there would have been no Russian Revolution. Lenin led the Bolsheviks and the revolutionary forces in assessing the mood among different classes, the readiness and determination of advanced sections of masses, the

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143. Lenin, “Lecture on The 1905 Revolution,” *Collected Works*, Vol. 23 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), p. 253.

144. Lenin, “Letters from Afar,” p. 302.

contradictions within the ruling class, in analyzing how a revolutionary situation might be developing, and the programmatic demands around which revolutionary unity could be forged. All of this involved fierce struggle with opportunists and revisionists, representing other class forces and programs.

Lenin's leadership is something Badiou recognizes and acknowledges, but he goes on to write out leadership, in the form of negating the "paradigm" of the "party-state," from his theorization of the event.

There is the famous episode: At a mass meeting on the eve of revolution, in the midst of intense discussion and debate, a social-democrat argued that there was no one and no party that will take power in Russian society. A voice rang out, "there is such a party."<sup>145</sup> It was Lenin. Without Lenin leading the Bolsheviks, October 1917 would have been a "non-event."

And even more fundamentally, without the "party-state" there is no real rupture. The event—the possibility of truly radical and emancipating change—proves ultimately fleeting, or what Badiou scholar Peter Hallward fittingly describes as a "politics of the 'flash.'"<sup>146</sup> This is why in repudiating the "party-state," Alain Badiou declares that the "age of revolution" is over. Alain Badiou's event, for all its explosive qualities and for all its emancipatory potential and poetry, only rips open the social fabric; whether the same old ruling forces—the "party of order"—then re-weaves and mends it, or whether a whole new fabric is brought into being, depends on whether there is a revolutionary vanguard party, a revolution, and a new state power.

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145. Cited by Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 52.

146. Hallward, *Badiou*, p. 43.

## Endnote on Philosophy

We cannot enter into a discussion of Badiou's overall philosophy here, as our focus is political philosophy. But we do make the following observation.

Badiou's philosophical construct, derived principally from mathematical set theory, is very much of a piece with postmodernist notions of a diffused social reality lacking structural dynamics or tendential motion.

Badiou's philosophy is especially polemical against historical materialism, Marx's breakthrough in scientifically approaching human society, history, and the dynamics of change. Badiou's key philosophical principles are established in *Being and Event*, about which Oliver Feltham, its English translator and a Badiou scholar in his own right, has said: "Usually *Being and Event* is read as effectuating a pulverization of the Marxist conception of history as an orientated totality ... there is no History, only historical situations."<sup>147</sup>

In invoking history with a capital "H," Feltham is referring to teleology, the idea that there is a pre-set pattern and outcome of history, that anything that has happened had to have happened, and that history is unfolding towards a final goal driven by a will and purpose.

While there have been secondary teleological tendencies in the communist movement, Badiou—even if there is on his part a "sincere attempt" to oppose this mechanical and religious tendency—has completely negated the scientific essence and approach of Marxism. Marxism identifies *fundamental relations, structures and processes, and dynamics* that underlie social formations and their historical development. It identifies a *coherence* in history, rooted in the transmission of productive forces from one generation to another.

There is no fixed trajectory or outcome, no "will or purpose," in human history. But the laws governing social development do operate—they operate as tendencies; there are factors of chance; complex interactions between the different levels of society; and there is the conscious, dynamic role of people. Bob Avakian has criticized and further ruptured with the secondary tendencies in the communist movement toward mechanical materialism, determinism, and teleology, as part of the new synthesis in communist theory that he has brought forward—on the basis of materialism and dialectics. Badiou, on the other hand, attempts to "detach" philosophy and a theory of social change ("the idea of communism") from materialism and from dialectics—in his attempt to move beyond what he conceives of as a construct, not the reality, of contradiction.

Badiou's theory negates the ability of people to scientifically understand reality beyond the surface level of phenomena and appearance, leading to a profoundly positivist, pragmatic, and empiricist philosophy, assigning knowledge and "truth" to what works, and to what appears. As a necessary consequence, it deprives revolutionary forces of any ability to consciously influence, shape, and transform reality—rather than simply tailing spontaneity and bowing down before

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147. Feltham, *Alain Badiou, Live Theory*, p. 104.

necessity. The ultimate horizon of this theory is defined by "what is"—or what appears to be—not "what could be" and "what should be." Ultimately, "what is" must of necessity "be": this world of capitalism-imperialism, with all its horrors.



## CONCLUSION

In his work *The Century*, Alain Badiou casts his gaze on the events and explosions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He takes in its wars and revolutions, its spasms of barbarity and heroism, even the ambitions of modern art. And he comes to a conclusion: “One of the century’s obsessions was that of obtaining something definitive.”<sup>148</sup> He is wary...he is weary.

But this is what revolution is about: “something definitive,” a radical and conscious toppling of the old and construction of the new. In that century of convulsive change, staggering dislocation, and unparalleled destruction, revolutions were made—made in response to the endless horror that is social existence on this planet, and made in difficult, often savage, conditions. World imperialism gave these revolutions neither quarter nor respite. And yet something extraordinary, unprecedented in intensity and tempo, emerged out of all of this: the most liberating societies in world history, giving hope and direction to oppressed humanity.

This is one of the crucial lessons, if not *the* crucial lesson, of “the century.” A radically different world is possible. Dare we go forward and rise to the challenges, and possibilities, of *this* century? And dare we go further and do better in changing the world?

We are now at the beginning of a new stage of communist revolution. At a time when clarity is needed, and when that clarity exists in Bob Avakian’s new synthesis as a basis for renewed advance of the communist project, Alain Badiou is offering up a theorization and rationalization for why “something definitive” is not feasible...is not desirable. What we get instead, for all the exertions of high theory, is the warmed-over, tasteless broth of social democracy, of theorizing and rationalizing, and of “prescriptions,” which remain firmly within, and in fact serve to reinforce, bourgeois society and what Marx so aptly described as the narrow horizon of “bourgeois right.”

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148. Badiou, *The Century*, p 36.