

It's the *Political Economy*, Stupid!  
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Two events mark the beginning and end of the first decade of the twenty-first century: the 9/11 attacks in 2001 and the financial meltdown in 2008. The language President Bush used, in both instances, to address the American people sounds like two versions of the same speech. Evoking the threat to the very American way of life, and the necessity for fast and decisive action to cope with the danger, he called for the partial suspension of core U.S. values—guarantees to individual freedom and market capitalism—to save these very values. Where does this similarity come from?

The Francis Fukuyama utopia of the “end of history”—the belief that liberal democracy had, in principle, won and the advent of a global, liberal world community lies just around the corner—seems to have had to die twice: the collapse of the liberal-democratic political utopia on 9/11 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism. If the 2008 financial meltdown has a historical meaning, it is as a sign of the end of the economic aspect of the Fukuyama utopia.

The first thing that strikes the eye in the reactions to the financial meltdown is that, as one of the participants put it: “No one really knows what to do.” The reason is that expectations are part of the game: how the market will react depends not only on how much the people trust the interventions, but even more on how much they think others will trust them - one cannot take into account the effects of one's own interventions. Long ago, John Maynard Keynes nicely rendered this self-referentiality when he compared the stock market to a silly competition in which participants must pick only a few pretty girls from a hundred photographs; the winner is the one who chose girls closest to the general opinion: “It is not a case of choosing those which, to the best of one's judgment, are really the prettiest, nor even those which average opinion genuinely thinks the prettiest. We have reached the third degree where we devote our intelligence to anticipating what average opinion expects the average opinion to be.” So we are forced to choose without having at our disposal the knowledge that would enable a qualified choice, or, as John Gray put it: “*We are forced to live as if we were free.*”

Joseph Stiglitz recently wrote that, although there is a growing consensus among economists that any bail-out based on Paulson's plan won't work, “it is impossible for politicians to do nothing in such a crisis. So we may have to pray that an agreement crafted with the toxic mix of special interests, misguided economics, and right-wing ideologies that produced the crisis can somehow produce a rescue plan that works – or whose failure doesn't do too much damage.”<sup>1</sup> He is right, since markets are effectively based on beliefs (even beliefs about other people's beliefs), so when the media worry about “how the markets will react” at the bail-out, it is a question not only about the real consequences of the bail-out, but about the belief of the markets into the plan's efficiency. This is why the bail-out may work even if it is economically wrong.

The pressure “to do something” is here like the superstitious compulsion to do some gesture when we are observing a process on which we have no real influence. Are our acts not often such gestures? The old saying “Don't just talk, do something!” is one of the most stupid things one can say, even measured by the low standards of common wisdoms. Perhaps, we were lately doing too much, intervening, destroying

environment... and it's time to step back, think and say the right thing. True, we often talk about something instead of doing it – but sometimes we also do things in order to avoid talking and thinking about them. Like quickly throwing 700 billions at a problem instead of reflecting on how it arose.

## 1. IT'S IDEOLOGY, STUPID!

Immanuel Kant countered the conservative motto “Don't think, obey!” not with “Don't obey, think!”, but with “Obey, BUT THINK!” When we are blackmailed by things like the bail-out plan, we should bear in mind that we are effectively blackmailed, so we should resist the populist temptation to act out our anger and thus hit ourselves. Instead of such impotent acting out, we should control our anger and transform it into a cold determination to think, to think in a really radical way, to ask what kind of a society are we leaving in which such blackmail is possible.

Will the financial meltdown be a sobering moment, the awakening from a dream? It all depends on how it will be symbolized, on what ideological interpretation or story will impose itself and determine the general perception of the crisis. When the normal run of things is traumatically interrupted, the field is open for a “discursive” ideological competition – for example, in Germany in the late 1920s, Hitler won in the competition for the narrative which will explain to Germans the reasons for the crisis of the Weimar republic and the way out of it (his plot was the Jewish plot); in France in 1940 it was Marechal Petain's narrative which won in explaining the reasons for the French defeat. Consequently, to put it in old-fashioned Marxist terms, the main task of the ruling ideology in the present crisis is to impose as narrative which will not put the blame for the meltdown onto the global capitalist system AS SUCH, but on its secondary accidental deviation (too lax legal regulations, the corruption of big financial institutions, etc.). Against this tendency, one should insist on the key question: which “flaw” of the system AS SUCH opens up the possibility for such crises and collapses? The first thing to bear in mind here is that the origin of the crisis is a “benevolent” one: after the digital bubble exploded in the first years of the new millennium, the decision across the party lines was to facilitate real estate investments in order to keep economy going and prevent recession – today's meltdown is the price paid for the fact that the US avoided a recession five years ago. The danger is thus that the predominant narrative of the meltdown will be the one which, instead of awakening us from a dream, will enabled us to *continue to dream*. And it is here that we should start to worry – not only about the economic consequences of the meltdown, but about the obvious temptation to reinvigorate the “war on terror” and the US interventionism in order to keep the economy running. Or, at least, to use the meltdown to impose further tough measures of “structural readjustment.”

An exemplary case of the way the meltdown already is used in ideologico-political struggle is the ongoing struggle for what to do with General Motors – should the state allow its bankruptcy or not? Since GM is one of the institutions which embody the American dream, its bankruptcy was long considered unthinkable – but more and more voices now refer to the meltdown as that additional push which should make us accept the unthinkable. The NYT column “Imagining a GM Bankruptcy” ominously begins with:

“As General Motors struggles to avoid running out of cash next year, the once-unthinkable prospect of a G.M. bankruptcy filing is looking a lot more, well, thinkable.”<sup>2</sup> After a series of expected arguments (the bankruptcy would not mean automatic loss of jobs, just a restructuring which would make the company leaner and meaner, more adapted to the harsh conditions of today’s economy, etc.), the column dots the i towards the end, when it focuses on the standoff “between G.M. and its unionized workers and retirees”: “Bankruptcy would allow G.M. to *unilaterally reject its collective bargaining agreements*, as long as a judge approved.” In other words, bankruptcy should be used to break the backbone of one of the last strong unions in the USA, leaving thousands with lower wages and other thousands with lower retirement sums. Note again the contrast with the urgency to save the big banks: here, where the survival of thousands of active and retired workers is at stake, there is, of course, no emergency, but, on the contrary, an opportunity to allow free market to show its brutal force. As if the trade unions, not the wrong strategy of the managers, are to be blamed for the GM troubled waters! This is how the impossible becomes possible: what was hitherto considered unthinkable within the horizon of the established standards of work decency and solidarity should become acceptable.

Marx wrote that bourgeois ideology love to historicize – every social, religious, cultural form is historical, contingent, relative – every form with the exception of its own. There WAS history, but now there IS no history. With capitalist liberalism, history is at an end, the natural form is found.<sup>3</sup> This old paradox of liberal ideology exploded with new power in today’s apologies of the End of History. No wonder the debate about the limits of liberal ideology is so thriving in France: the reason is not the long French statist tradition which distrusts liberalism; it is rather that the French distance towards the mainstream Anglo-Saxon liberalism provides an external position which enables not only a critical stance, but also a clearer perception of the basic ideological structural of liberalism. No wonder, then, that, if one wants to find a clinically-pure, lab-distilled, version of today’s capitalist ideology, one should turn to Guy Sorman. The very title of the interview he recently gave in Argentina, “This crisis will be short enough,”<sup>4</sup> signals that Sorman fulfills the basic demand that ideology has to meet with regard of the financial meltdown: to renormalize the situation – “things may appear harsh, but the crisis will be short, it is just part of the normal cycle of creative destruction through which capitalism progresses.” Or, as Sorman put it in another of his texts, “creative destruction is the engine of economic growth”: “This ceaseless replacement of the old with the new—driven by technical innovation and entrepreneurialism, itself encouraged by good economic policies—brings prosperity, though those displaced by the process, who find their jobs made redundant, can understandably object to it.” (This renormalization, of course, co-exists with its opposite: the panic raised by the authorities in order to create a shock among the wide public – “the very fundamentals of our way of life are threatened!” – and thereby to make them ready to accept the proposed – obviously unjust - solution as inevitable.) Sorman’s starting premise is that, in the last decades (more precisely, after the fall of Socialism in 1990), economy finally became a fully tested science: in an almost laboratory situation, the same country was split into two (West and East Germany, South and North Korea), each part submitted to the opposite economic system, and the result is unambiguous.

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But is economy really a science? Does the present crisis not demonstrate that, as one of the participants put it: “No one really knows what to do”? The reason is that expectations are part of the game: how the market will react depends not only on how much the people trust the interventions, but even more on how much they think others will trust them - one cannot take into account the effects of one’s own interventions. While Sorman admits that market is full of irrational behavior and reactions, his medicament is – not even psychology, but – “neuroeconomics”: “economic actors tend to behave both rationally and irrationally. Laboratory work has demonstrated that one part of our brain bears blame for many of our economically mistaken short-term decisions, while another is responsible for decisions that make economic sense, usually taking a longer view. Just as the state protects us from Akerlof’s asymmetry by forbidding insider trading, should it also protect us from our own irrational impulses?” Of course, Sorman is quick to add that “it would be preposterous to use behavioral economics to justify restoring excessive state regulations. After all, the state is no more rational than the individual, and its actions can have enormously destructive consequences. Neuroeconomics should encourage us to make markets more transparent, not more regulated.”

With this happy twin-rule of economic science supplemented by neuroeconomics, gone are then the times of ideological dreams masked as science, as it was the case of Marx whose work “can be described as a materialist rewriting of the Bible. With all persons present there, with proletariat in the role of Messiah. The ideological thought of the XIXth century is without debate a materialized theology.” But even if Marxism is dead, the naked emperor continues to haunt us with new clothes, the chief among them ecologism:

“No ordinary rioters, the Greens are the priests of a new religion that puts nature above humankind. The ecology movement is not a nice peace-and-love lobby but a revolutionary force. Like many a modernday religion, its designated evils are ostensibly decried on the basis of scientific knowledge: global warming, species extinction, loss of biodiversity, superweeds. In fact, all these threats are figments of the Green imagination. Greens borrow their vocabulary for science without availing themselves of its rationality. Their method is not new; Marx and Engels also pretended to root their world vision in the science of their time, Darwinism.”<sup>5</sup>

Sorman therefore accepts the claim of his friend Aznar that the ecological movement is the “Communism of the XXIst century”:

“It is certain that ecologism is a recreation of Communism, the actual anticapitalism /.../. However, its other half is composed of a quarter of pagan utopia, of the cult of nature, which is much earlier than Marxism, which is why ecologism is so strong in Germany with its naturalist and pagan tradition. Ecologism is thus an anti-Christian movement: nature has precedence over man. The last quarter is rational, there are true problems for which there are technical solutions.”

Note the term “technical solution”: rational problems have technical solutions. (Again, a blatantly wrong claim: the confrontation with ecological problems demands choices and

decisions – what to produce, what to consume, on what energy to rely – which ultimately concern the very way of life of a people; as such, they are not only not technical, but eminently political in the most radical sense of the fundamental social choices.) So no wonder that capitalism itself is presented in technical terms, not even as a science but simply as something that works: it needs no ideological justification, because its success itself is its sufficient justification – in this regard, capitalism “is the opposite of socialism, which has a manual”: “Capitalism is a system which has no philosophical pretensions, which is not in search of happiness. The only thing it says is: ‘Well, this functions.’ And if people want to live better, it is preferable to use this mechanism, because it functions. The only criterion is efficiency.”

This anti-ideological description is, of course, patently false: the very notion of capitalism as a neutral social mechanism is ideology (even utopian ideology) at its purest. The moment of truth in this description is nonetheless that, as Alain Badiou put it, capitalism is effectively not a civilization of its own, with its specific way of rendering life meaningful. Capitalism is the first socio-economic order which *de-totalizes meaning*: it is not global at the level of meaning (there is no global “capitalist world view,” no “capitalist civilization” proper – the fundamental lesson of globalization is precisely that capitalism can accommodate itself to all civilizations, from Christian to Hindu and Buddhist); its global dimension can only be formulated at the level of truth-without-meaning, as the “real” of the global market mechanism. The problem here is not, as Sorman claims, that reality is always imperfect, and that people always need to entertain dreams of impossible perfection. The problem is that of meaning, and it is here that religion is now reinventing its role, discovering its mission to guarantee a meaningful life to those who participate in the meaningless run of the capitalist mechanism. This is why Sorman’s description of the fundamental difficulty of capitalist ideology is wrong:

“From the intellectual and political standpoint, the great difficulty in administering a capitalist system is that it does not give rise to dreams: no one descends to the street to manifest in its favor. It is an economy which changed completely the human condition, which has saved humanity from misery, but no one is ready to convert himself into a martyr of this system. We should learn to deal with this paradox of a system which nobody wants, and which nobody wants because it doesn’t give rise to love, which is not enchanting, not a seducer.”

This description is, again, patently not true: if there ever was a system which enchanted its subjects with dreams (of freedom, of how your success depends on yourself, of luck around the corner, of unconstrained pleasures...), it is capitalism. The true problem lies elsewhere: how to keep people’s faith in capitalism alive when the inexorable reality of a crisis brutally crushes these dreams? Here enters the need for a “mature” realistic pragmatism: one should heroically resist dreams of perfection and happiness and accept the bitter capitalist reality as the best possible (or the least bad) of all worlds. A compromise is necessary here, a combination of fighting utopian illusory expectations and giving people enough security to accept the system. Sorman is thus no market-liberal fundamentalist extremist – he proudly mentions that some orthodox followers of Milton Friedman accused him of being a Communist because of his (moderate) support of the welfare-state:

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“There is no contradiction between State and economic liberalism; on the contrary, there is a complex alliance between the two. I think that the liberal society needs a well-fare state, first, with regard to intellectual legitimacy – people will accept the capitalist adventure if there is an indispensable minimum of social security. Above this, on a more mechanic level, if one wants the destructive creativity of capitalism to function, one has to administer it.”

Rarely was the function of ideology described in clearer terms – to defend the existing system against any serious critique, legitimizing it as a direct expression of human nature:

“An essential task of democratic governments and opinion makers when confronting economic cycles and political pressure is to secure and protect the system that has served humanity so well, and not to change it for the worse on the pretext of its imperfection. / Still, this lesson is doubtless one of the hardest to translate into language that public opinion will accept. The best of all possible economic systems is indeed imperfect. Whatever the truths uncovered by economic science, the free market is finally only the reflection of human nature, itself hardly perfectible.”

Such ideological legitimization also perfectly exemplifies Badiou’s precise formula of the basic paradox of enemy propaganda: it fights something of which it is itself not aware, something for which it is structurally blind – not the actual counter-forces (political opponents), but the *possibility* (the utopian revolutionary-emancipatory potential) which is immanent to the situation:

“The goal of all enemy propaganda is not to annihilate an existing force (this function is generally left to police forces), but rather to annihilate an *unnoticed possibility of the situation*. This possibility is also unnoticed by those who conduct this propaganda, since its features are to be simultaneously immanent to the situation and not to appear in it. »<sup>6</sup>

This is why enemy propaganda against radical emancipatory politics is by definition cynical – not in the simple sense of not believing its own words, but at a much more basic level: it is cynical precisely and even more insofar as it *does* believe its own words, since its message is a resigned conviction that the world we live in, even if not the best of all possible worlds, is the least bad one, so that any radical change can only make it worse. (As always in effective propaganda, this normalization can be combined without any problem with its opposite, reading the economic crisis in religious terms - Benedict XVI, always sharp, was expeditious in capitalizing on the financial crisis along these lines: “This proves that all is vanity, and only the word of God holds out!”)

Sorman’s version is, of course, too brutal and open to be endorsed as hegemonic; it has something of the “over-identification,” stating so openly the underlying premises that it is an embarrassment. Out of present crises, the version which is emerging as hegemonic is that of “socially responsible” eco-capitalism: while admitting that, in the past and present, capitalism was often over-exploitative and catastrophic, the claim is that one can already discern signs of the new orientation which is aware that the capitalist mobilization of a society’s productive capacity can also be made to serve ecological

goals, the struggle against poverty, etc. As a rule, this version is presented as part of the shift towards a new holistic post-materialist spiritual paradigm: in our era of the growing awareness of the unity of all life on the earth and of the common dangers we are all facing, a new approach is emerging which no longer opposes market and social responsibility – they can be reunited for mutual benefit. As Thomas Friedmann put it, nobody has to be vile in order to do business; collaboration with and participation of the employees, dialogue with customers, respect for the environment, transparency of deals, are nowadays the keys to success. Capitalists should not be just machines for generating profits, their lives can have a deeper meaning. Their preferred motto is social responsibility and gratitude: they are the first to admit that society was incredibly good to them by allowing them to deploy their talents and amass wealth, so it is their duty to give something back to society and help people. After all, what is the point of their success, if not to help people? It is only this caring that makes business success worthwhile... The new ethos of global responsibility can thus put capitalism to work as the most efficient instrument of the common good.

But was the financial meltdown of 2008 not a kind of ironic comment on the ideological nature of this dream of the spiritualized and socially responsible eco-capitalism? As we all know, on December 11 2008 Bernard Madoff, a great investment-manager and philanthropist from Wall Street, was arrested and charged with allegedly running a \$50 billion "Ponzi scheme" (or pyramid scheme). Madoff's funds were supposed to be low-risk investments, reporting steady returns, usually gaining a percentage point or two a month. The funds' stated strategy was to buy large cap stocks and supplement those investments with related stock-option strategies. The combined investments were supposed to generate stable returns and also cap losses – what attracted new and new investors was the regularity of high returns, independent of the market fluctuations – the very feature that should have made his funds suspicious. Sometime in 2005 Madoff's investment-advisory business morphed into a Ponzi scheme, taking new money from investors to pay off existing clients who wanted to cash out. Madoff told senior employees of his firm that "it's all just one big lie" and that it was "basically, a giant Ponzi scheme," with estimated investor losses of about \$50 billion. What makes this story so surprising are two features: first, how the basically simple and well-known strategy still worked in today's allegedly complex and controlled field of financial speculations; second, Madoff was not a marginal eccentric, but a figure from the very heart of the US financial establishment (Nasdaq), involved in numerous charitable activities. Is it not that the Madoff case presents us with a pure and extreme case of what caused the financial breakdown? One has to ask here a naïve question: but didn't Madoff know that, in the long term, his scheme is bound to collapse? What force counteracted this obvious insight? Not Madoff's personal evil or irrationality, but a pressure, a drive, to go on, to expand the circulation in order to keep the machinery running, which is inscribed into the very system of capitalist relations - the temptation to "morph" legitimate business into a pyramid scheme is part of the very nature of the capitalist circulation. There is no exact point at which the Rubicon was crossed and the legitimate investment business "morphed" into an illegal pyramid scheme: the very dynamic of capitalism blurs the frontier between "legitimate" investment and "wild" speculation, because capitalist investment is in its very core a risked wager that the scheme will turn out to be profitable, an act of borrowing from the future. A sudden shift in uncontrollable

circumstances can ruin a very “safe” investment - this is what the capitalist “risk” is about. This is the reality of the “postmodern” capitalism: the ruinous speculation raised to a much higher degree than it was even imaginable before.

The self-propelling circulation of the Capital thus remains more than ever the ultimate Real of our lives, a beast that by definition cannot be controlled, since it itself controls our activity, making us blind for even the most obvious insights into the dangers we are courting. It is one big fetishist denial: “I now very well the risks I am courting, even the inevitability of the final collapse, but nonetheless ... I can protract the collapse a little bit more, take a little bit greater risk, and so on indefinitely.”

## 2. WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

So where are we today, after the “obscure disaster” of 1989. As in 1922, the voices from below ring with malicious joy all around us: “Serves you right, lunatics who wanted to enforce their totalitarian vision on society!” Others try to conceal their malicious glee, they moan and raise their eyes to heaven in sorrow, as if to say: “It grieves us sorely to see our fears justified! How noble was your vision to create a just society! Our heart was beating with you, but our reason told us that your noble plans can finish only in misery and new unfreedoms!” While rejecting any compromise with these seductive voices, we definitely have to “begin from the beginning,” i.e., not to “build further upon the foundations” of the revolutionary epoch of the XXth century” (which lasted from 1917 to 1989 or, more precisely, 1968), but to “descend” to the starting point at chose a *different* path.

In the good old days of Really-Existing Socialism, a joke was popular among dissidents, used to illustrate the futility of their protests. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century Russia occupied by Mongols, a farmer and his wife walk along a dusty country road; a Mongol warrior on a horse stops at their side and tells the farmer that he will now rape his wife; he then adds: “But since there is a lot of dust on the ground, you should hold my testicles while I’m raping your wife, so that they will not get dirty!” After the Mongol finishes his job and rides away, the farmer starts to laugh and jump with joy; the surprised wife asks him: “how can you be jumping with joy when I was just brutally raped in your presence?” The farmer answers: “But I got him! His balls are full of dust!” This sad joke tells of the predicament of dissidents: they thought they are dealing serious blows to the party *nomenklatura*, but all they were doing was getting a little bit of dust on the *nomenklatura*’s testicles, while the *nomenklatura* went on raping the people... Is today’s critical Left not in a similar position? Our task is to discover how to make a step further – our thesis 11 should be: in our societies, critical Leftists have hitherto only dirtied with dust the balls of those in power, the point is to cut them off.

But how to do it? The big (defining) problem of the Western Marxism was the one of the lacking revolutionary subject: how is it that the working class does not complete the passage from in-itself to for-itself and constitute itself as a revolutionary agent? This problem provided the main *raison d’etre* of its reference to psychoanalysis which was evoked precisely to explain the unconscious libidinal mechanisms which prevent the rise of class consciousness inscribed into the very being (social situation) of the working class. In this way, the truth of the Marxist socio-economic analysis was

saved, there was no reason to give ground to the “revisionist” theories about the rise of the middle classes, etc. For this same reason, the Western Marxism was also in a constant search for other social agents who could play the role of the revolutionary agent, as the under-study replacing the indisposed working class: Third World peasants, students and intellectuals, the excluded...

Therein resides the core of truth of Peter Sloterdijk’s thesis according to which, the idea of Judgment Day when all the accumulated debts will be fully paid and an out-of-joint world will finally be set straight, is taken over in secularized form by the modern Leftist project, where the agent of judgment is no longer God, but the people. Leftist political movements are like “banks of rage”: they collect rage-investments from people and promise them large-scale revenge, the re-establishment of global justice. Since, after the revolutionary explosion of rage, full satisfaction never takes place and an inequality and hierarchy re-emerge, there always arises a push for the *second* – true, integral – revolution which will satisfy the disappointed and truly finish the emancipatory work: 1792 after 1789, October after February... The problem is simply that there is never enough rage-capital. This is why it is necessary to borrow from or combine with other rages: national or cultural. In Fascism, the national rage predominates; Mao’s Communism mobilizes the rage of exploited poor farmers, not proletarians. In our own time, when this global rage has exhausted its potential, two main forms of rage remain: Islam (the rage of the victims of capitalist globalization) plus “irrational” youth outbursts, to which one should add Latino American populism, ecologists, anti-consumerists, and other forms of anti-globalist resentment: the Porto Alegre movement failed to establish itself as a global bank for this rage, since it lacked a positive alternate vision.

Today, one should shift this perspective totally, and break the circle of such patient waiting for the unpredictable opportunity of a social disintegration opening up a brief chance of grabbing power. Maybe, just maybe, this desperate awaiting and *search* for the revolutionary agent is the form of appearance of its very opposite, the fear of *finding* it, of seeing it where it already buds. There is thus only one correct answer to Leftist intellectuals desperately awaiting the arrival of a new revolutionary agent which will perform the long-expected radical social transformation – the old Hopi saying with a wonderful Hegelian dialectical twist from substance to subject: “We are the ones we have been waiting for.”<sup>7</sup> Waiting for another to do the job for us is a way of rationalizing our inactivity. - It is against this background that one should re-assert the Communist idea – a quote from Badiou:

“The communist hypothesis remains the good one, I do not see any other. If we have to abandon this hypothesis, then it is no longer worth doing anything at all in the field of collective action. Without the horizon of communism, without this Idea, there is nothing in the historical and political becoming of any interest to a philosopher. Let everyone bother about his own affairs, and let us stop talking about it. In this case, the rat-man is right, as is, by the way, the case with some ex-communists who are either avid of their rents or who lost courage. However, to hold on to the Idea, to the existence of this hypothesis, does not mean that we should retain its first form of presentation which was centered on property and State. In fact, what is imposed on us as a task, even as a

philosophical obligation, is to help *a new mode of existence of the hypothesis* to deploy itself.”<sup>8</sup>

One should be careful not to read these lines in a Kantian way, conceiving Communism as a “regulative Idea,” thereby resuscitating the specter of “ethical socialism” with equality as its a priori norm-axiom... One should maintain the precise reference to a set of social antagonism(s) which generate the need for Communism – the good old Marx’s notion of Communism not as an ideal, but as a movement which reacts to actual social antagonisms, is still fully relevant. If we conceive Communism as an “eternal Idea,” this implies that the situation which generates it is no less eternal, that the antagonism to which Communism reacts will always be here – and from here, it is only one step to a “deconstructive” reading of Communism as a dream of presence, of abolishing all alienating re-presentation, a dream which thrives on its own impossibility.

So which are the antagonisms which continue to generate the Communist Idea? Where are we to look for this Idea’s new mode? It is easy to make fun of Fukuyama’s notion of the End of History, but the majority today *is* Fukuyamaist: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally-found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is to render it more just, tolerant, etc. Here is what recently happened to Marco Cicala, an Italian journalist: when, in an article, he once used the word “capitalism,” the editor asked him if the use of this term is really necessary – could he not replace it by a synonymous one, like “economy”? What better proof of the total triumph of capitalism than the virtual disappearance of the very term in the last 2 or 3 decades?

The simple but pertinent question arises here: but if alternatives to liberal-democratic capitalism obviously work better than all known alternatives, if liberal-democratic capitalism is – if not the best, then at least – the least bad form of society, why should we not simply resign to it in a mature way, even accept it wholeheartedly? Why insist on the Communist idea against all hopes? Is such an insistence not an exemplary case of the narcissism of the lost Cause? Does such a narcissism not underlie the predominant attitude of academic Leftists who expect from a Theoretician to tell them what to do – they desperately want to get engaged, but do not know how to do it efficiently, so they await the Answer from a Theoretician... Such an attitude is, of course, in itself a lie: as if the Theoretician will provide the magic formula, resolving the practical deadlock. The only correct answer here is: if you do not know what to do, then nobody can tell you, then the Cause is irremediably lost.

Again, it is thus not enough to remain faithful to the Communist Idea – one has to locate in historical reality antagonisms which make this Idea a practical urgency. The only *true* question today is: do we endorse the predominant naturalization of capitalism, or does today’s global capitalism contain strong enough antagonisms which prevent its indefinite reproduction?

There are four such antagonisms: the looming threat of *ecological* catastrophe, the inappropriateness of *private property* for the so-called “intellectual property,” the socio-ethical implications of *new techno-scientific developments* (especially in biogenetics, and, last but not least, *new forms of apartheid*, new Walls and slums. There is a qualitative difference between the last feature, the gap that separates the Excluded from

the Included, and the other three, which designate the domains of what Hardt and Negri call “commons,” the shared substance of our social being whose privatization is a violent act which should also be resisted with violent means, if necessary: *the commons of culture*, the immediately socialized forms of “cognitive” capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post, etc. (if Bill Gates were to be allowed monopoly, we would have reached the absurd situation in which a private individual would have literally owned the software texture of our basic network of communication); *the commons of external nature* threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to forests and natural habitat itself); *the commons of internal nature* (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity). What all these struggles share is the awareness of the destructive potentials, up to the self-annihilation of humanity itself, if the capitalist logic of enclosing these commons is allowed a free run. Nicholas Stern was right to characterize the climate crisis as “the greatest market failure in human history.” So when Kishan Khoday, a UN team leader, recently wrote: “There is an increasing spirit of global environmental citizenship, a desire to address climate change as a matter of common concern of all humanity.”, one should give all the weight to the terms “global citizenship” and “common concern” – the need to establish a global political organization and engagement which, neutralizing and channeling market mechanisms, stands for a properly communist perspective.

It is this reference to “commons” which justifies the resuscitation of the notion of Communism: it enables us to see the progressing “enclosure” of the commons as a process of proletarianization of those who are thereby excluded from their own substance, a proletarianization also points towards exploitation. The task today is to renew the political economy of exploitation – say, of the anonymous “cognitive workers” by their companies.

It is, however, only the fourth antagonism, the reference to the Excluded, that justifies the term Communism. There is nothing more “private” than a State community which perceives the Excluded as a threat and worries how to keep them at a proper distance. In other words, in the series of the four antagonisms, the one between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one: without it, all others lose their subversive edge. Ecology turns into a problem of sustainable development, intellectual property into a complex legal challenge, biogenetics into an ethical issue. One can sincerely fight for ecology, defend a broader notion of intellectual property, oppose the copyrighting of genes, without confronting the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded – even more, one can even formulate some of these struggles in the terms of the Included threatened by the polluting Excluded. In this way, we get no true universality, only “private” concerns in the Kantian sense of the term. Corporations like Whole Foods and Starbucks continue to enjoy favor among liberals even though they both engage in anti-union activities; the trick is that they sell products with a progressive spin: one buys coffee made with beans bought at above fair-market value, one drives a hybrid vehicle, one buys from companies that provide good benefits for their customers (according to the corporation's own standards), etc. In short, without the antagonism between the Included and the Excluded, we may well find ourselves in a world in which Bill Gates is the greatest humanitarian fighting against poverty and diseases, and Rupert Murdoch the greatest environmentalist mobilizing hundreds of millions through his media empire.

What one should add here, moving beyond Kant, is that there are social groups

which, on account of their lacking a determinate place in the “private” order of social hierarchy, directly stand for universality; they are what Jacques Ranciere called the “part of no-part” of the social body. All truly emancipatory politics is generated by the short-circuit between the universality of the “public use of reason” and the universality of the “part of no-part” -this was already the Communist dream of the young Marx: to bring together the universality of philosophy with the universality of the proletariat. From Ancient Greece, we have a name for the intrusion of the Excluded into the socio-political space: democracy.

The predominant liberal notion of democracy also deals with those Excluded, but in a radically different mode: it focuses on their inclusion, on the inclusion of all minority voices. All positions should be heard, all interests taken into account, the human rights of everyone guaranteed, all ways of life, cultures and practices respected, etc. – the obsession of this democracy is the protection of all kinds of minorities: cultural, religious, sexual, etc. The formula of democracy is here: patient negotiation and compromise. What gets lost is the proletarian position, the position of universality embodied in the Excluded.

The new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians who have “nothing to lose but their chains,” we are in danger of losing ALL: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract empty Cartesian subject deprived of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, with our genetic base manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being make us all in a way all proletarians, reduced to “substanceless subjectivity,” as Marx put it in *Grundrisse*. The figure of the “part of no-part,” confronts us with the truth of our own position, and the ethico-political challenge is to recognize ourselves in this figure - in a way, we are all excluded, from nature as well as from our symbolic substance. Today, we are all potentially a HOMO SACER, and the only way to prevent actually becoming one is to act preventively.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, “The Bush administration may rescue Wall Street, but what about the economy?”, *The Guardian*, September 30 2008.

<sup>2</sup> “*Imagining a G.M. Bankruptcy*,” *New York Times*, December 2 2008, “DealBook” in *Business* section.

<sup>3</sup> And do we not find echoes of the same position in today’s discursive “anti-essentialist” historicism (from Ernesto Laclau to Judith Butler) which views every social-ideological entity as the product of a contingent discursive struggle for hegemony? As it was already noted by Fred Jameson, the universalized historicism has a strange ahistorical flavor: once we fully accept and practice the radical contingency of our identities, all authentic historical tension somehow evaporates in the endless performative games of an eternal present. There is a nice self-referential irony at work here: there is history only insofar as there persist remainders of “ahistorical” essentialism. This is why radical anti-essentialists have to deploy all their hermeneutic-deconstructive art to detect hidden

traces of “essentialism” in what appears a postmodern “risk society” of contingencies – the moment they were to admit that we already live in an “anti-essentialist” society, they would have to confront the truly difficult question of the historical character of today’s predominant radical historicism itself, i.e., the topic of this historicism as the ideological form of the “postmodern” global capitalism.

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<sup>4</sup> (“Esta crisis sera bastante breve,” entrevista a Guy Sorman, *Perfil* (Buenos Aires), 2 November 2008, p. 38-43),

<sup>5</sup> Guy Sorman, “Behold, our familiar cast of characters,” *The Wall Street Journal Europe*, July 20-21 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, Seminar on Plato at the ENS, 13 February 2008 (unpublished).

<sup>7</sup> A Hopi saying, quoted from Daniel Pinchbeck, *2012*, New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher / Penguin 2007, p. 394.

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, Paris: Lignes 2007, p. 153.