

The Subject of the Revolution

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Abstract: This essay uses China Miéville's narrative of the October Revolution to consider how Alain Badiou's and Slavoj Žižek's accounts of the subject of politics can be brought together. It argues that when the people are the subject of politics, the subject of a truth is a gap. Finding and carrying the subject, maintaining the gap, is the function of the subjectivable body. This essay argues that the party remains the indispensable form of the subjectivable body. Badiou may reject the party today, but he enables us to understand its necessity. Žižek may call for a "clear break" with twentieth century communism, but he demonstrates our inescapable continuity with it.

Keywords: Subject, party, truth, gap, Miéville, Badiou, Žižek

Who makes the revolution? Party, class, people? The one hundredth anniversary of the Russian 1917 Revolution offers an opportunity to consider again this perennial Marxist question.

For some, the question "who makes" is already poorly posed. Processes occur. Dynamics unfold. Crises develop. Revolutions have their own logics and to approach them as if they were the planned and deliberate effects of decisions of conscious agents is to begin with a category mistake. But the question of the subject of revolution is not reducible to an account of conscious agency. So much was already clear to Georg Lukács in 1924. In *Lenin: The Unity of His Thought*, Lukács affirms a paradox of revolutionary causality: the party is "both *producer* and *product*, both precondition *and* result of the revolutionary mass movement."¹ Revolution shapes its makers. The subject that makes the revolution doesn't preexist it; the subject is an effect of revolution.

Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek further dispel the fiction of an agential subject of politics. Badiou presents the subject as a response to a truth-event. Žižek argues that the subject is a gap, failure, or void. Badiou gives us the convert, disciple, militant, or adept. Žižek gives us the *Cogito*. With respect to the subject of politics, more specifically, to the subject of revolution, are these accounts compatible? Is the subject of a truth the subject as a gap? When the people are the subject of politics, the answer is yes.

In the Marxist tradition, the people are divided and disruptive, present retroactively in the insistence of crowds of women, workers, soldiers, and peasants. Never the unity of the nation or the fullness of reconciled society, the people are the subject to which the revolution

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¹ Lukács 2009, p. 32.

attests. Lukács invokes the people in just this sense when he explains the dialectical transformation of the concept of the people in Lenin's characterization of the Russian Revolution: "The vague and abstract concept of 'the people' had to be rejected, but only so that a revolutionary, discriminating, concept of 'the people'—the revolutionary alliance of the oppressed—could develop from a concrete understanding of the conditions of proletarian revolution."² China Miéville's story of the Russian Revolution brings this idea to life. Miéville gives us a revolution forcing through what might impede, delay, or derail it. It's a "messianic interruption" that "emerges from the quotidian." It's unsayable, "yet the culmination of everyday exhortations."³ Exceeding any party or class that might contain it, the revolution manifests the people as the collective subject of politics. Revolution shapes its makers through the effects that attest to the force of the divided people. The people make the revolution that makes the people.

October

Miéville's *October* presents the actuality of revolution as an accelerating accumulation of effects: the force of the many where they don't belong, the breakdown of order, custom, and provisioning, and the exhilarating push of the unexpected overwhelm as society becomes nature. Groups and agents struggle to steer events – or at least avoid being crushed by them. Some succeed, as often despite as because of their best efforts: "the revolutionaries made slapstick errors."⁴ Neither the best theory nor best practices determine outcomes, although patient, thorough organizing helps push them in one direction rather than another. And even as the primary force seems to belong to contingency -- "insurgency has strange triggers" -- the open sequence of emancipatory politics nevertheless admits of another power, that of the revolutionary people.⁵ The event of revolution is the struggle over and through them, their struggle.

Three aspects of Miéville's story stand out in this regard – crowds, infrastructure, and division. Miéville never ceases to bring out the power of masses in the streets. Number matters. At the beginning of 1917, over 400,000 workers lived in Petrograd. 160,000 soldiers were stationed

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2 Lukács 2009, pp. 22-23.

3 Miéville 2017, p. 306.

4 Miéville 2017, p. 290.

5 Miéville 2017, p. 22.

in the city. On January 9th, 150,000 workers went on strike. 30,000 struck in Moscow. By February 14, 100,000 were still striking. On the 22nd, the bosses at the Putilov factory locked out 30,000 workers. The next day was International Women's Day. Radicals organized speeches, meetings, and celebrations linking the war, the sky-rocketing cost of living, and the situation of women. "But even they did not expect what happened next."⁶ Women poured out of the factories and marched through Petrograd's most militant districts, "filling the side streets in huge and growing numbers."⁷ Men came on and joined them. They shouted not just for bread, but for an end to the war and an end to the monarchy. "Without anyone having planned it, almost 90,000 women and men were roaring on the streets of Petrograd."⁸ The next day, 240,000 people were on strike. Number continued to matter throughout the spring and summer. 400,000 people on the streets of Petrograd in June. 50,000 deserters from the front crowding into the city. Half a million demonstrating on July 4th.

Although a matter of number, the crowd's force exceeds it, always giving rise to the affective intensities propelling revolution. The hungry many lining up for bread at understocked bakeries are "crucibles for dissent."⁹ Crowds launch, unleash, smash, and ransack. They block and overwhelm. They break into police arsenals, take the weapons, and kill the police. Crowds storm prisons, tear open doors, and free inmates. They surge and flock, storm and rout. Crowds are jubilant, enraged, militant, trusting, furious, incandescent, delighted, demanding, disgusted. They fill space and can't be held back. They insist, clamor, and stampede. Crowds manifest as peasants seizing land, soldiers' mass defections, workers transformed into an armed militia. As the September backlash sets in, crowds also present as catastrophe: "starving proletarian communities raged from house to house in bands, hunting for both food speculators and food."¹⁰ Crowds bring fire and fury, the "smell of smoke and the howling of apes," "apocalyptic nihilo-drunkenness."¹¹ Metaphor and metonymy, crowds are the street's growling anger and the city's radical energy.

Miéville attends to the materialities of revolution. Yes, the level of the development of Russia's productive forces – as with most accounts

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6 Miéville 2017, p. 41.

7 Miéville 2017, p. 41.

8 Miéville 2017, p. 42.

9 Miéville 2017, p. 39.

10 Miéville 2017, p. 244.

11 Miéville 2017, pp. 245, 244.

of the 1917 revolution, the country's weak bourgeoisie and economic backwardness do not go unmentioned -- but also revolution's diverse infrastructures: trains, railways, tramcars, telephone lines, banners, presses, and bridges; smashed glass, ricocheting bullets, and bursts of electricity. Media plays a role; of course the party papers, but also the telegraph: "with the news of the revolution spread the revolution itself."¹² Some weapons are "too filthy to fire."¹³ Others lack ammunition. A plan calls for a specific signal: a red lantern raised on a flagpole. It turns out that no one has a red lantern and once a substitute lantern is found it's nearly impossible to get it up the flagpole. The signal comes ten hours late. Contingency accompanies the material infrastructure of revolution as much as it does its crowds.

Political forms are also components of the revolution's infrastructure. In 1917 Russia, the most famous of the political forms is the soviet. It evokes a classic Russian peasant mode of association. It repeats 1905's revolutionary reinvigoration of this form. And in February 1917, it arises from the streets. "Activists and streetcorner agitators" call for the return of the soviets "in leaflets, in boisterous voices from the crowds."¹⁴ Signal and form of people's power, soviets spread virally throughout the country. The soviet form expresses as well 1917's tense stand-off and accommodation between the revolution and reform, the Soviet of Workers and Soldiers Deputies in its relation of dual power with the Duma.

Perhaps the most notorious of the revolution's infrastructure of political forms, at least in the eyes of some contemporary leftists, is the party. But while too many today present the party as a military machine with iron-discipline, a centralized apparatus capable of taking hold of the entire society in a revolutionary situation, Miéville gives us a slew of revolutionary parties, sometimes cooperating, often fighting, trying to navigate a rapidly changing situation. The Bolsheviks are not even Lenin's Bolsheviks but rather their own contradictory mix of discipline and disobedience held together by ideological debate in a political form responding to revolutionary conditions. In March, Lenin is still in Zurich. Bolsheviks are divided with respect to opposition to the Provisional Government. The Petrograd Committee passes a "semi-Menshevik" resolution. Returning, Lenin excoriates his comrades for even their limited support of the Provisional Government. He rages at the Bolsheviks' lack of discipline. He advocates moving to the revolution's

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¹² Miéville 2017, p. 60.

¹³ Miéville 2017, p. 291.

¹⁴ Miéville 2017, p. 52.

second phase: no collaboration with the bourgeoisie; power in the hands of the proletariat and poorest peasants. Bolshevik support isn't automatic. Lenin has to work for it. He doesn't always win and even when he does the Bolsheviks are often small presences in the various soviets in which they participate. In the difficult and confused July days, the party lags behind increasingly militant workers and soldiers. Stalin drafts a vague pamphlet that "pretended to a unity of purpose and analysis, an influence, that the party did not possess."¹⁵ In September, Lenin is in an utterly antagonistic relation to his own party. Isolated in his convictions, his writing censored, he not only disobeys a direct instruction of the Central Committee, but also tenders his resignation from it. Like the break-up that doesn't take, the resignation doesn't happen. The party remains divided.

Soviet and party are but two of the political forms providing an infrastructure for revolution. Additional forms include other modes of political association – congresses, conferences, and committees. They include the police and the military and their different organizations, some reactionary, some radical. There were the Women's Battalions of Death, set up by the Kerensky government, as well as armed Cossacks who refused to ride against the people. The archive of tactics and when to deploy them is also a component of revolution's infrastructure: demands, "patient explanation," compromise, slogans. In this vein, theory is itself part of the infrastructure of revolution, one of the ways participants make sense of what is going on and what is to be done. Miéville brings out theory's indeterminacy, the ways it directs its adherents in opposing directions. Exemplary is the understanding of Marxism as designating a particular timeline for revolution: proletarian revolution comes after bourgeois revolution. Their theory told supporters of the Soviet in the early days of dual power that their role was to put brakes on the revolution: "here was the hesitancy of those whose socialism taught that a strategic alliance with the bourgeoisie was necessary, that, however messily events proceeded, there were stages yet to come, that it was the bourgeoisie who must first take power."¹⁶

With revolution's crowds and infrastructures comes division. Division concentrates, intensifies, and propels the revolution. Such concentration, intensification, and propulsion expose what appear from one perspective as impediments to the revolutionary power of the people to be its demonstration. Multiple divisions consolidate into binaries: Soviet v. Duma, other governmental apparatuses cease to matter; for

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¹⁵ Miéville 2017, p. 175.

¹⁶ Miéville 2017, p. 59.

or against the war, subtle distinctions fall by the wayside; people v. bourgeoisie, the proletariat's and peasantry's different interests eclipsed by their common opposition to a government unwilling to end the war; revolution and counter-revolution as reactionary forces fight back. There is even a concentration of the division between the politicized and the disengaged. Miéville notes a dramatic decrease in voting between May and September and accompanying increase in the militancy of the votes cast; the center cannot hold. Each concentration of social and political division intensifies the political moment: dual power strengthens the workers and soldiers represented in the Soviet and weakens the capacities of the Provisional Government; mass desertion amplifies losses at the front and violence and shortages in the cities; the economic crisis is inscribed in blood on the backs of the poor; Bolsheviks are arrested, vigilantes roam the streets, and across the country arise ultra-right anti-Semitic pogromists. In July, "everywhere was confrontation, sometimes in sordid form."¹⁷ Concentration and intensification of division push the revolution forward. This push is the revolution, not the crowds and the infrastructure alone but the dynamics that conjoin, energize, and direct them. A party gives instructions. The crowd ignores them. Parties call for unity, but fail to find a way to unify. Plans fail. Crowds surprise everyone with a sea of red banners. Counter-revolutionaries smash opponents. Revolution pushes forward despite countless impediments, myriad attempts to calm and contain it. The people are the gap between expectation and result, the divisive force that exceeds available channels.

The overcoming of impediments, the challenge they present and the response they engender, drives the revolution. Events ignore the hesitation of those socialists convinced that the time is not ripe for proletarian revolution. Their historical anxiety, no matter how well-grounded in Marxist theory, responds to and is met by the force of the revolutionary people – crowds, deserters, rioters, and even counter-revolutionaries. The real of revolution breaks through whether they want it or not. Soviets across the country, Bolsheviks across the soviets, give the revolution a form by providing sites that can see themselves as the people. Crowds generate their affective supplement. Even the divisions between and among the socialists -- Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, Lenin and his own party – function as enabling impediments through which to discern the people as the subject of revolution. As divisions are concentrated and intensified, decisions are made. Which one is correct is determined in the streets, in the course of its interaction with the multiplicity of changing circumstances. Intensification makes some ideas,

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¹⁷ Miéville 2017, p. 190.

some tactics and slogans, better at some points and worse at others. The efficacy of tactics and slogans points to the people as their cause, and not to the parties or factions that introduce them. Lenin has to appeal to peasants as well as workers because that's who the people are.

October gives us October as the event of revolution. The event accumulates through conflicting combinations of crowds, infrastructures, and division. The force of the people exceeds the theories, associations, and measures pronounced sometimes in their name, sometimes to control or contain them.¹⁸ From the one side, their revolutionary force appears regardless of whether it is wanted, predicted, or authorized. Its effects manifest with the breaking through or overcoming of each impediment. From the other, it is the attempts to understand, mobilize, channel, and win the support of the divided people that present the revolution to itself. The fact of this presentation, the necessity of mediation, propels the revolution whether the presentation is right or wrong, accurate or not. The struggle over the presentation of the revolution doubles and inflects the revolution itself. The people as revolution's subject is an effect of the impediments they can be said to have overcome in their assertion of their power. Neither audience to action on a political stage, inert mass set in motion by energizing parties, nor victims to processes outside their control, the people are present in the accumulated effects of upheaval that testify to the divided people as their subject.

The subject of truth

Badiou presents the political subject as the subject of a truth. It emerges in response to a truth event. This response consists of two operations: a wager and a process. The subject is the effect of both.

Something new, something previously inexistent, happens. A new truth disrupts the setting in which it appears. This event of a new truth creates a problem. If the event were understandable within the terms of its setting, it wouldn't be an event. It would simply reiterate already given understandings, confirm expectations. "Nothing would permit us to say: here begins a truth."¹⁹ This "nothing" or absence of permission occasions a wager: an event has taken place. The wager is the response that occasions the subject as the necessary correlative of a truth event.

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¹⁸ Seeing the people through the excess that testifies to them as their cause opens up another way of reading Stalin-era emphasizes on over-fulfillment of plans and quotas. That a plan was over-fulfilled was proof that it was the work of the people as it subject. It indexed the fact that the people can never be fully contained.

¹⁹ Badiou 2004, p. 62.

Without the response of a subject, there is no truth. The response initiates “an infinite procedure of the verification of the true.”²⁰ This is the process of examining the truth event, tracing out its repercussions, pursuing its implications. The process is open, “chance-driven.” These are uncharted waters. Badiou refers to this effort as “an exercise in fidelity.”²¹ “Subject” is thus a name for a response comprised of two actions – a decision and a procedure. As Badiou writes: “A subject is a throw of the dice which does not abolish chance, but which accomplishes chance through the verification of the action which founds it as a subject.”²² “Subject” is the pivot point of an action -- not the thrower but the throw -- and the faithful effort to carry out that action.

Chance, a wager, figures as much in fidelity as it does in the initial decision for a truth event. For even as the procedure of verification results in new experiments, new knowledge, new effects, the “truth is incompletable.”²³ There is no final or ultimate ground, although the fiction of completeness can be hypothesized. The process of verification builds the truth of the event to which it responds, manifesting not certainty but fidelity.

Badiou uses revolutions, marked by dates such as 1792 and 1917, to demonstrate how the subject of politics is the subject of truth. Events occur. This occurrence is the emergence of a subject -- without a subject, there could not be an event. The subject responds through the work of verifying the new truth. This exercise of fidelity cannot be completed. It exceeds the event which gives rise to it, even as this very exceeding is part of the truth of the event. Badiou presents Lenin as a “subjective revolutionary” (not the subject of revolution) faithful to the Paris Commune and the French Revolution. Unlike those around him, those wedded to a stagist conception of revolution, Lenin was faithful to events rather than doctrine.²⁴ And to avoid turning the history of Russia into the history of France, we should note as well Lenin’s fidelity to the 1905 Revolution as well as his responsiveness to those around him, to rank and file comrades, soviets of workers, soldiers, and peasants, the many in the streets. We should recognize, in other words, Lenin as responding to the people as the subject of the revolution by placing his response within the collective work of verification that produces it.

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20 Badiou 2004, p. 62.

21 Badiou 2004, p. 62.

22 Badiou 2004, p. 63.

23 Badiou 2004, p. 65.

24 Badiou 2004, p. 180.

Subsequent to this account of the subject, Badiou develops the concept of the “subjectizable body,” that is, the body of truth constituted around a truth event.²⁵ This concept draws out the material dimensions of fidelity: the procedures of verification constitute a new collective field, one that appears as a constellation of the primordial statement of the truth event, procedures of verification, and their consequences. Through the body, truth makes its way in the world, disciplining the faithful it incorporates. The concept of the subjectizable body expresses the fact that the subject of truth must be a collective subject, “a Subject who – even empirically -- cannot be reduced to an individual.”²⁶ Truth is carried, attested to, and realized in and through the practices of collectives, collectives such as parties and soviets.

The concept of the subjectizable body allows Badiou to account for subjectivizing effects beyond fidelity. He introduces two additional types of subject, the reactive and the obscure. Like the faithful subject, these respond to the truth event, the former with the goal of containing the effects of the new body, the latter with destroying them. “All three are figures of the active present in which a hitherto unknown truth plots its course.”²⁷ All three are collective figures, incorporations of responses, choices, “individual adhesions.” Their inter-dynamics, the struggle between them, inflects the development of the body of truth. Badiou uses the Leninist political sequence as an example: standing up to armed counter-revolution requires the revolutionary party to adopt military style organizational discipline.²⁸

Accompanying the collective subjectizable body is the Idea. Through the Idea the individual is incorporated into the body or process of truth. Badiou: “the Idea is the mediation between the individual and the Subject of a truth – with ‘Subject’ designating here that which orients a post-evental body in the world.”²⁹ The Idea is the means by which individuals become part of something larger than themselves.

One might expect that Badiou’s explorations of the subject of truth as a political subject would further amplify various elements of the body of truth, perhaps in terms of anxiety, superego, courage, and justice or party, class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat, and communism as he does in *Theory of the Subject*. There he already presents the subject as

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25 Badiou 2011, p. 126.

26 Badiou 2010, p. 232.

27 Badiou 2011, p. 93.

28 Badiou 2011, p. 127.

29 Badiou 2011, p. 105.

“neither cause nor ground.” He writes: “It holds out in what it polarizes, and supports the effect of preceding itself in the space: always invisible in the excess of its visibility.”³⁰ Marx and Freud give us such an account of the subject with the proletariat and the unconscious. They each find the subject in the gaps of an order, in the movement of its effects. With specific regard to Marxism, Badiou identifies the party as the body of politics. The party is necessary but not sufficient for the subject of politics. It does not guarantee it. “But for there to be a subject, for a subject to be *found*, there must be the support of a body.”³¹ Again, the party is not the subject; it’s the political subject’s condition of possibility. It sees the subject in the wake of its effects.

Badiou pursues a different line. In *The Communist Hypothesis*, he brings out the individual decision to become part of a body of a truth. What in *Theory of the Subject* appeared as a collective response in *The Communist Hypothesis* takes the form of an individual decision. In *Theory of the Subject* he illustrates subjectivization and the subjective process with popular insurrection and the party.³² In *The Communist Hypothesis*, these are replaced by the individual’s participation in a political process via the mediation of the Idea. The Idea enables the individual to imagine itself, to authorize itself, as a political being by incorporating itself into new Subject.

Put in Lacanian terms, the Idea combines the three registers of the real of a truth procedure, the inscription of this real in history via the production of a new collective field or Symbolic, and the imaginary individual element. The Idea of communism, Badiou writes, “is the imaginary operation whereby an individual subjectivization projects a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narrative of a History.”³³ The Idea of communism lets the individual become the militant.

The Idea displaces the subject. Rather than construing the subject as itself comprised of eventual truth, subjectivable body, and imaginary operation, Badiou empowers the Idea. The Idea of communism persists, available to individuals but not dependent on a subject. It continues detached from the people. Today, Badiou insists, “‘communist’ can no longer be the adjective qualifying a politics.”³⁴ The Idea must be brought

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30 Badiou 2009, p. 280. “Space” is Badiou’s shorthand for “space of placement” which highlights the “action of the structure” or the way the structure acts on the elements that comprise it, p. 10.

31 Badiou 2009, p. 290.

32 Badiou 2009, p. 257.

33 Badiou 2010, p. 239.

34 Badiou 2010, p. 240.

back uncoupled “from any predicative usage.”³⁵ No communist party, communist politics, communist movement, communist revolution—just communism as the Idea through which an individual understands herself and work. Prioritizing the Idea also severs communism from history, which Badiou treats as necessarily a history of the state and thus of constraints. Badiou aims to release the deadening hold of a vision of history that presented communism as its inevitable telos. History, or a specific arrangement of facts, does not follow inevitably or directly from a truth-event. Truth is the aleatory process of fidelity to an event. So even if, for an individual, “the Idea presents the truth as if it were a fact,”³⁶ history does not and cannot verify it.

The more Badiou emphasizes the Idea as supporting and authorizing the individual (but to do what?), the more ephemeral becomes the subjectivable body. Rather than a new collective field, rather than the material accumulation of processes of verification, rather than a set of disciplining collective expectations, the subjectivable body or symbolic register of the subject becomes either constrained by a flat, stagnant, one-dimensional conception of the state or raptured into a glorious body configured via its subtraction from this state. The ephemerality of the subjectivable subtracted body manifests in Badiou’s separation of practice from the symbolic and his insertion of it into the real: “‘Practice’ should obviously be understood as the materialist name for the real.”³⁷ It manifests as well in Badiou’s treatment of proper names as bodies-of-truth – Spartacus, Thomas Münzer, Robespierre, Toussaint Louverture, Blanqui, Marx, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Mao, Che Guevara.³⁸ Historic figures, great individuals take the place of communism’s lost adjectival form, its capacity to designate a fighting organization, a party. Badiou writes:

In these proper names, the ordinary individual discovers glorious, distinctive individuals as the mediation for his or her own individuality, as the proof that he or she can force its finitude. The anonymous action of millions of militants, rebels, fighters, unrepresentable as such, is combined and counted as one in the simple, powerful symbol of the proper name.³⁹

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35 Badiou 2010, pp. 240 – 241.

36 Badiou 2010, p. 245.

37 Badiou 2010, p. 247.

38 Badiou 2010, p. 250.

39 Badiou 2010, p. 250.

The militant imagines himself as Lenin or Che, glorying in this self-identification.

In contrast to the imaginary subjectivation of the militant who sees himself as a great revolutionary leader even as he subtracts himself from the state, Badiou in *Theory of the Subject* recognized the necessity of a political body, the party as the “subject-support of all politics.”⁴⁰ He writes, “The party is the body of politics, in the strict sense. The fact that there is a body by no means guarantees that there is a subject ... But for there to be a subject, for a subject to be *found*, there must be the support of a body.”⁴¹

In the later Badiou, communism has lost its body. It persists in the Idea, that is to say, in the imaginary, as the image of great singular heroes (and one single heroine). Distanced from the people, no longer part of the body that finds the subject of politics, comrades are reduced to fans, the practical relations through which they discipline each other into a component of revolutionary infrastructure diminished if not forgotten. Badiou addresses this loss with a degree of uncertainty: “if the party-form is obsolete” and “if it is true that the era of parties” ended in the sixties and seventies.⁴² He continues to acknowledge the necessity of organization, of political discipline and the imperative of preserving the gap of the event. Yet we are stuck, he thinks, in the organizational problem bequeathed by the twentieth century, the problem of the relation or encounter between party and state, eventual gap and faithful formalization of its egalitarian genericity.

Badiou’s analysis nevertheless illuminates how and why we are becoming unstuck. Crowds and riots, the energy of masses of people assembling out of doors, press against the authority of the state, altering “the relationship between the possible and the impossible.”⁴³ This energy indicates the power of the egalitarian generic against identitarian constraints. Badiou uses Lenin (and Mao) to illustrate the point: the subject of the revolution was more than the proletariat; it was the people (Badiou misleadingly says the “whole” people; better to recognize their constitutive, generative division). The power of the generic is preserved by political organizations faithful to the egalitarian rupture. In *Crowds and Party*, I conceptualize the communist party as the form of fidelity

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40 Badiou 2009, p. 286.

41 Badiou 2009, p. 290.

42 Badiou 2012, pp. 80 - 81.

43 Badiou 2012, p. 94.

to the egalitarian discharge.⁴⁴ It holds open the gap, guarding against its effacement by capital and the state. Over the last decade, protests, revolutions, and demonstrations have incited new political organizations – many of them parties – to give form to the collective desire expressed in the crowd rupture. Parties and associations testify to the people’s will for egalitarian change and make it present as an event. In Badiou’s words, “organization is the same process as the event.”⁴⁵ These organizations are not Lenin’s party or Mao’s party – and Lenin’s and Mao’s parties were never simply Lenin’s or Mao’s parties but always themselves multiple, dividing, and changing. Neither are they “not parties,” but rather new experiments with the party form in a new setting. Badiou collapses the communist party into its historical enactments. But his account of the inextricability of organization and event, truth and subjectivable body tells us that the party remains an unsurmountable form for communist movement under capitalist conditions. No organization, no event.

Badiou writes: “A political organization is the Subject of a discipline of the event, an order in the service of a disorder, the constant guardianship of an exception. It is a mediation between the world and changing the world.”⁴⁶ The party is the subjectivable body of truth, the faithful carrier of the event that enables it to endure. Badiou makes explicit reference to Lacan’s Subject, that is, to Symbolic law as a formalization of desire. That Lacan’s Subject is barred directs us to the disorder and exception, to the people as the gap. Guardians of an exception know that the people as the revolutionary subject of politics always and necessarily exceeds the party that finds it.

The subject as a gap

For decades Žižek has developed and defended a view of the subject as self-relating negativity. Whether expressed as primal void, gap in the structure, death drive, out-of-jointness, failure of actualization, Lacanian barred Subject, Hegelian self-alienation of substance, or simply as *Cogito*, Žižek’s subject is universal – “it is the universality of a gap, a cut: not the underlying universal feature shared by all particulars, but the cut of an impossibility which runs through them all.”⁴⁷ What are the implications of this view of the subject for our thinking of politics,

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44 Dean 2016a.

45 Badiou 2012, p. 66.

46 Badiou 2012, p. 66.

47 Žižek 2012, p. 831.

revolution, and communism?

Žižek argues that the “wager of the communist hypothesis” is that the empty Cartesian subject provides the basis of a politics: “the political name of the empty Cartesian subject is a proletarian, an agent reduced to the empty point of substanceless subjectivity. A politics of radical universal emancipation can only be grounded on the proletarian experience.”⁴⁸ Rather than a sociological designator of an empirically given stratum of society, “proletariat” points to capitalism’s symptom, that exterior point within the system that embodies its contradictions. As the gravedigger capitalism itself produces, the proletariat is necessary for the system’s continuation and demise, capitalism’s condition and limit. For this reason the proletariat is a class that can only win political power by abolishing itself as a class. Its victory is the same as its elimination, the destruction of the conditions that produce it. What, then, is the “proletarian experience” that grounds a politics of radical universal emancipation? Presumably, it is negativity – limit, loss, and negation. The capitalist mode of production is itself a limit point of proletarian politics. As long as the maintenance of this system constrains the political horizon, workers will continue to be exploited and any “improvement” in the system will further their exploitation. Likewise, whether in factory, industry, or broader economy, any gain for capital is a loss for workers. Technology (dead labor) benefits capitalists (but only in the short term) and harms workers – from the assembly line with its speed ups and decapacitation to computerization and robotization. The more the worker produces, the less the value of her product. Under capitalism, when working class struggles win in the short term, they lose in the long term, resulting in the greater immiseration of workers. Increases in union membership and wages generate capital flight and off-shoring. Factories close. Unemployment rises. The negativity of the proletarian experience grounds a politics of radical universal emancipation because it draws out and pushes through the barriers constitutive of the capitalist system.

Žižek also expands the idea of the proletariat, emphasizing proletarianization as the process of reduction to substanceless subjectivity. He writes:

What unites us is that, in contrast to the class image of proletariat who have ‘nothing to lose but their chains,’ we are in danger of losing *everything*: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our

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48 Žižek 2017a, p. 25.

genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being renders us all proletarians, reduce to ‘substanceless subjectivity,’ as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*.⁴⁹

The global capitalist economy’s communicative networks, intrusive biotech, and fossil fuel-driven industries destroy the world they produce. Of course the impact of this destruction is unevenly distributed. Hence Žižek emphasizes a fourth dimension of proletarianization: exclusion. This fourth dimension introduces the cut of politics, the fact that there are some who directly experience and embody the proletarianization processes that others can continue to ignore. Žižek draws on Rancière: the excluded are the part of no-part lacking a legitimate place in the social body. Communicative, biopolitical, carbon capitalism produces the social order from which they are excluded. Qua excluded, they are the universal symptomatic point of that order. Again, the point is formal: because the system rests of their exclusion, bringing them in brings it down.

Žižek’s rendering of proletarianization as a form of exclusion – rather than exploitation – obscures the way proletarianization is the form of capitalism’s capture and inclusion of human labor power. Enclosure, colonization, imperialism, and dispossession are all processes through which people are included in capitalist processes. Liberal parliamentary democracy, with accompanying promises of rights, participation, representation, and the rule of law includes workers as citizens, migrants, and guest workers. In capitalist liberal democracies, inclusion is a vehicle for exploitation – the more workers competing for employment, the lower the wage. Under communicative capitalism we face a situation where ever more people work for free, for just the possibility of paid employment in the future. The premise of “big data” is that there is no part of human experience and interaction that cannot be captured, stored, and mined as a new resource for capitalism.⁵⁰ Capitalism is a system that constitutively exploits people, not one that constitutively excludes them.

Žižek’s gesture to exclusion nevertheless highlights the division or gap constitutive of the subject of politics. The first three processes of proletarianization are inclusive; they apply to everyone and hence are inadequate for the articulation of a politics. The fourth inscribes a cut, the mark of subjectivation. In effect, the first three denote “subjectless substance,” continuous processes, circulation without end.

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49 Žižek 2009, p. 92.

50 Dean 2016b.

Communicative, biopolitical, carbon capitalism are processes without a subject, the background context and social substance of contemporary life capable of inciting, at best, an ethics or moralism. One should care about climate change, be concerned about genetic engineering, share outrage on social media. Politicization requires the assertion of a division, a cut in the imaginary collective “everyone” that not only registers differential social effects but that ties these differential effects to the system’s constitutive violence. This cut is the inversion into substanceless subjectivity.

That the ground of a politics of radical universal emancipation is a gap means that there are no guarantees. There is no cover for any decision: “no Subject who knows,” whether intellectual, party, or ordinary people.⁵¹ That there could be such a subject is a myth. For example, no individual person ever knows exactly what they want, the truth of their desire, why they do what they do. Psychoanalysis’s fundamental premise of the unconscious expresses this basic insight. The problem of the democratic notion of popular sovereignty exemplifies the point further still. Rather than there being a smooth flow from actual people to the collective power of the sovereign people, a gap disrupts the whole, belying the fantasy of the whole thing or order. No matter how popular the sovereign, the people and the government are not present at the same time. Where the people are present, there is chaos, disruption. Where government is present, then the people are not. Insofar as the people can never be fully present – some don’t show up, didn’t hear what was going on, were misled by a powerful speaker, were miscounted from the outset, completely disagreed and so wanted to count themselves out, were barred from attending – their necessary absence is the gap of politics. In Rancière’s words, “the reality denoted by the terms ‘worker,’ ‘people’ or ‘proletarian’ could never be reduced either to the positivity of a material condition nor to the superficial conceit of an imaginary, but always designated a partial (in both senses) linkage, provisional and polemical, of fragments of experience and forms of symbolization.”⁵² Split, divided, impossible, the people cannot be politically. They are only political through and as one, few, or some (never as a direct embodiment, only as limit): one represents us to ourselves as many; few make possible and organize, provide themes and ideas; some do all the work. The people are always non-all, not simply because the many is open and incomplete but because it cannot totalize itself. The rule of a leader, party, or constitution compensates for or occupies the hole of the missing conjunction between

51 Žižek 2012, p. 1008.

52 Rancière 2011, p. 14.

people and government. Nonetheless, this rule cannot overcome the division that the people mobilizes; division goes all the way down— antagonism is fundamental, irreducible.

Žižek links the gap of the subject to an argument for a new communist master or leader. A “true Master” releases the sense that you can do the impossible, “you can think beyond capitalism and liberal democracy as the ultimate framework of our lives.”⁵³ The Master disturbs us into freedom, unsettling the coordinates of the given so as to unleash unexpected possibilities. Lenin is Žižek’s example, the Lenin capable of mobilizing the Bolsheviks to become more active, vigilant, and engaged organizers. “The function of the Master here is to enact an authentic division – a division between those who want to hang on within the old parameters and those who recognize the necessity of change.”⁵⁴ Contrasting the hierarchy of politics organized around a central leader with the horizontalism of Occupy Wall Street, Žižek insists that self-organizing can never be enough. Some kind of transference to a Leader “supposed to know” what they want is necessary: “the only path to liberation leads through transference.”⁵⁵

Like Badiou’s celebration of great leaders, Žižek’s embrace of the Master turns the work of the collective into the achievement of one, as if those who follow, those who work, were not in fact the source and location of mastery. Followers create the leader. Yes, the path to liberation leads through transference, but the too easy opposition between self-organizing multitude and hierarchy sustained by charismatic leader effaces the organizational space, the relations between followers, members, comrades. The subject supposed to know is a structural position, produced in a transference space. It doesn’t attach automatically to a specific figure by virtue of title or capacity. It is an effect. In the history of communism, the Party has itself occupied this position, as has proletariat, people, and singular leader, the latter produced via the infamous cult of personality. What matters here is that the Party organizes a transference space offering the position of the subject supposed to know. So, no transference without the space of transference; no break from passivity and direct political engagement without the party. Formalization, the imperative of organization, is not reducible to the demand for a leader.

Elsewhere Žižek writes that “the authority of the Party is not that of determinate positive knowledge, but that of the form of knowledge,

53 Žižek 2017b, p. lxii.

54 Žižek 2017b, p. lxiv.

55 Žižek 2017b, p. lxv.

of a new type of knowledge linked to a collective political subject.”⁵⁶
 This form is that of a shift in perspective, a collective political position on a situation that had appeared limited and determined by capitalism. The perspective of the Party comes not from religion, law, or individual insight but rather from the disciplining effect of collectivity on its members. Party knowledge is always in a sense hysterical in that it cannot be satisfied; its response is that’s not it – yet. The Party generates knowledge out of the dialectics of encounters between theory and practice, encounters which themselves change the agents and terrain of struggle and thereby necessarily exceed whatever momentary solution produced them. The experience of struggle changes the strugglers; they are different from what they were before, with a different sense of their context and capacities. This different sense likewise inflects their understanding of their theory. Accumulated experiences lead to rectifications, reassessments, returns. Mao’s account of the Marxist theory of knowledge is exemplary here:

In all the practical work of our Party, all correct leadership is necessarily "from the masses, to the masses". This means: take the ideas of the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas) and concentrate them (through study turn them into concentrated and systematic ideas), then go to the masses and propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action, and test the correctness of these ideas in such action. Then once again concentrate ideas from the masses and once again go to the masses so that the ideas are persevered in and carried through. And so on, over and over again in an endless spiral, with the ideas becoming more correct, more vital and richer each time.⁵⁷

The spiral of concentrating, action, and testing is endless. This is what and how the Party knows.

The classic model of the revolutionary party’s dilemma – the time is never right for revolution; it’s either precipitous or postponed, perpetually waiting for the moment to mature – presents the problem of the Party’s knowledge. This is not only a matter of its absent ground or guarantee. It’s a matter of the party form. Holding open the gap, serving as guardian of the exception, requires fidelity to the egalitarian rupture that testifies to

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 56 Žižek 2002, p. 189.

57 Mao 1943.

the people as its cause. Party knowledge organizes desire; it is knowledge of a lack because the people are the effect of the process they incite.

Although Žižek does not join Badiou in urging a communism subtracted from the party and the state, their positions overlap with regard to historical communism. Žižek writes: “if the communist project is to be renewed as a true alternative to global capitalism, we must make a clear break with the twentieth-century communist experience.”⁵⁸ Given that he writes this in an introduction to a collection of Lenin’s writings published in connection with the centenary of the Russian 1917 Revolution, it is hard to make sense of what Žižek might mean by “clear break.” He draws on Lenin’s short essay, “On Ascending a High Mountain,” where Lenin describes the need to make economic concessions (the New Economic Policy) after the civil war. Žižek highlights Lenin’s point that communists without illusions will have the strength and flexibility to “begin from the beginning” over and over again.⁵⁹ But what beginning? Žižek says that we cannot build “on the foundations of the revolutionary epoch of the twentieth century” yet he uses Lenin to ground the argument. Lenin teaches the lesson of trying again and again, of descending the mountain to take a different path – just as Mao presents Marxist knowledge as an endless spiral of learning from the masses, concentrating and testing their ideas, putting them into action, and learning again.

Žižek’s (un)clear break extends to Western social democracy – also defeated together with communism in 1989 – as well as to the direct regulation of production by the producers. He argues that “the left will have to propose its own positive project beyond the confines of the social-democratic welfare state.”⁶⁰ At the same time, he rejects radical revolution as self-defeating and advocates pinpointing those modest demands “which appear as possible although they are de facto impossible” (like cancellation of the Greek debt or single-payer healthcare in the US).⁶¹ Drawing out the impossible enables “the need for a radical universal change ... to emerge by way of mediation with particular demands.”⁶² The most generous reading is that Žižek is identifying goals and tactics, a new left vision made possible by the exposure of the system’s limits. What’s missing, however, is the link

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 58 Žižek 2017b, p. xxix.

59 Žižek 2017b, p. xxviii.

60 Žižek 2017b, p. xxix.

61 Žižek 2017b, p. lxxvii.

62 Žižek, 2017b, p. lxxvii.

between exposure and action. The demand for the cancellation of the Greek debt has been made over and over again, exposing the brutality of the Germans and the financial institutions of the EU. In fact, this brutality was not even in question: faced with a humanitarian crisis, the EU continued to insist on draconian cuts of Greek social services. Likewise, a call for single-payer healthcare has long featured in left politics in the US; it enters into mainstream debate as one option among others to be considered within a general framework of seeking compromise among competing interests and market requirements. That the system cannot meet the needs and demands of the majority of people is already clear, acknowledged even by mainstream media and politicians. What's necessary is not exposing what everyone already sees, but channeling discontent into capacities for action. The introduction of particular demands by mainstream parties into a broken system is not enough; it fails to do the ground-level work of organizing into a mass political struggle those involved in local and issue-specific activist campaigns. Moreover, not only does a focus on the particular demand as a kind of symptomatic point obscure the need for an organized politics that concentrates, intensifies, and propels the inchoate divisions already fracturing society, but even more fundamentally it ignores the indispensability of the body that sees, that finds, the people. There is no shortcut *here* – no magic bullet that transforms the demonstration of the system's inadequacy into either the system's collapse or the building of a new one. For this, organization is necessary – “there must be the support of a body.”

The convolutions of Žižek's call for a clear break with the twentieth century communist experience suggest the utility of an inversion: twentieth-century communism was *itself* a series of breaks, steps forward and back, failures and new beginnings, climbs and descents, combinations and splits. There is no straight-forward, determined, path toward communism (as Marx already told us in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*). The “clear break” must be with the fantasy that occludes the gap already constitutive of the communist experience – the gap of the subject.

Conclusion

The Russian 1917 Revolution opened up a century of communism. The revolution was irreducible to a single party, although the communist party became the body faithful to it as an event. The Bolsheviks carried the Revolution as a people's revolution, finding in the confusion of forces and temporalities the force of the people as subject. That the people are its subject means that they always necessarily exceed whatever is

enacted in their name. It means as well that their presence as the people dissipates, fails to endure, absent the faithful body. Since the defeat of the Soviet experiment, and for many, since the compromised desiccations of so many of the communist parties engaged with the state, it has been hard to see the people as the subject of politics. Identitarian fragments fight – in the name of religions, ethnicities, and nationalities – but the people are found but rarely. The task is to become the body that can find the people. As the organized form of fidelity to the egalitarian event, the communist party exceeds its specific histories; these histories themselves are histories of splits and ruptures, histories of a gap. One year later, this gap is still the people as the subject of politics.

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