

**Alain Badiou
and the aporia
of democracy
within generic
communism**

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Badiou's critique of democracy

Alain Badiou in *Rebirth of History*¹ offers his thoughts on the latest wave of mass movements and riots that shook the world, especially in 2011, from the Arab Spring to the Indignados and Occupy! Badiou welcomes this social and political dynamic. However, he is critical of one crucial aspect of the discourse of some of these movements, namely the demand for real or direct democracy. Badiou insists that '[t]o demand 'real democracy', as opposed to bad democracy, does not create any enduring dynamic', because 'it remains much too internal to the established democratic ideology'.² He is, also, particularly critical of the tendency of people who take part in such movements to think that the democratic practices within the movement can also be a model for a new organization of the State.

These people think that the popular democratic practices of the movement (of any historical riot, no matter when and where it occurs) form a kind of paradigm for the state to come. Egalitarian assemblies are held; everyone has the right to speak; social, religious, racial, national, sexual and intellectual differences are no longer of any significance. Decisions are always collective. In appearance at least: seasoned militants know how to prepare for an assembly by a prior, closed meeting that will in fact remain secret. But no matter, it is indeed true that decisions will invariably be unanimous, because the strongest, most appropriate proposal emerges from the discussion. And it can then be said that 'legislative' power, which formulates the new directive, not only coincides with 'executive power', which organizes its practical consequences, but also with the whole active people symbolized by the assembly.³

Badiou bases his opposition to this demand for mass democratic practices as a way to administer the state on the assumption that such forms of democratic politics could only be possible at the end of a process of withering away of the State. He invokes the authority of Marx himself

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1 Badiou 2012.

2 Badiou 2012, p. 97.

3 Badiou 2012, pp. 44-45

to support this claim, returning to Marx's insistence that some form of transitional dictatorship is necessary in order to initiate the process that could lead to some form of social organization without the state.

Why not extend these features of mass democracy, which are so powerful and inspiring, to the state in its entirety? Quite simply because between the democracy of the riot and the routine, repressive, blind system of state decisions - even, and especially, when they claim to be 'democratic' - there is such a wide gulf that Marx could only imagine overcoming it at the end of a process of the state's withering away. And, to be brought to a successful conclusion, that process required not mass democracy everywhere, but its dialectical opposite: a transitional dictatorship which was compacted and implacable.⁴

From these passages it becomes obvious that although Badiou is not directly critical of democratic practices within movements, especially during as 'historical riots' that ground 'in the occupied space the promise of a new, long-term temporality',⁵ but he does not think that this can be turned into a permanent political solution. His reference to the classical Marxist theme of the dictatorship of the proletariat, is not limited to the necessary class oppressive character of any form of proletarian political power (in the sense that any form of power is always, in the last instance, *class* power, and that, also in the last instance, any class state power is a class dictatorship), but also to the form of its functioning.

How does Badiou attempt to describe this notion of the *popular dictatorship*? For Badiou a popular dictatorship represents exactly that particular moment in the evolution of an insurrectionary sequence, when a mass movement, that represents the truth in a particular situation, namely the possibility of an emancipatory and egalitarian sequence, manages to impose its will, without any other form of legitimization, either quantitative (i.e. claiming to be the majority) or procedural (referring to formal democratic procedures) other than its decision to impose its *will*.

By 'popular dictatorship' we mean an authority that is legitimate precisely because its truth derives from the fact

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4 Badiou 2012, p. 45.

5 Badiou 2012, p. 35.

that it legitimizes itself. No one is the delegate of anybody else (as in a representative authority); for what they say to become what everyone says, nobody needs propaganda or police (as in a dictatorial state), for what they say is what is true in the situation; there are only the people who are there; and those who are there, and who are obviously a minority, possess an accepted authority to proclaim that the historical destiny of the country (including the overwhelming majority comprising the people who are not there) is them. 'Mass democracy' imposes on everything outside it the dictatorship of its decisions as if they were those of a general will.⁶

Although Badiou explicitly refers to Rousseau, he criticizes him for his 'concession [...] to electoral procedures'⁷ and he insists that what Rousseau described as the general will could any emerge within the 'minoritarian but localized'⁸ dynamic of an historical riot. However, his emphasis is not on the dynamic of an historical riot per se; rather, he stresses the relation of a historical truth to a *political truth*. And such a truth can only be imposed by this kind of 'dictatorial', authoritarian means, based upon the 'authority of truth, the authority of reason',⁹ this particular popular 'authoritarianism' being the main reason for the appeal of such mass insurrectionary movements.

Authoritarian in the strict sense, because, at the start at any rate, the fact that there is an absolute justice in the historical riot is what no one is entitled publicly to ignore. And it is precisely this dictatorial element that enthuses everyone, just like the finally discovered proof of a theorem, a dazzling work of art or a finally declared amorous passion - all of them things whose absolute law cannot be defeated by any opinion.¹⁰

For Badiou what motivates people in such mass movements and insurrectionary sequences is this encounter with a Truth and a demand for

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6 Badiou 2012, p. 59-60.

7 Badiou 2012, p. 60.

8 Badiou 2012, p. 60.

9 Badiou 2012, p. 61.

10 Badiou 2012, p. 61.

unconditional justice. Therefore, what he has described as the reopening of History by such movements, is not “real democracy’, but [...] the authority of the True, or of an unconditional Idea of justice’.¹¹

This criticism of democracy has been a constant feature of Alain Badiou’s latest writings. One of the texts collected in *Metapolitics*¹² is dedicated to this criticism of democracy. Badiou begins by revisiting Lenin’s criticism of democracy. He makes a distinction between two forms of criticism of democracy by Lenin. The first one is based upon the opposition of proletarian to bourgeois democracy. The second one, which Badiou prefers, is based upon the assumption that ‘*democracy* should in truth always be understood as a *form of state*’.¹³ If democracy is a form of State, then it cannot be by itself a political aim for communist politics, whose aim should be ‘generic communism [...] an egalitarian society of free association between polymorphous labourers [...] [where] the State as an authority separate from public coercion is dissolved’.¹⁴ For Badiou the emphasis on democracy leads not to generic communism, but to a politics aiming at determining ‘the good State’.¹⁵ In a politics of generic communism ‘democracy’ is relevant only ‘*as long as ‘democracy’ is grasped in sense other than a form of the State*’.¹⁶ However, Badiou thinks that this treatment of democracy as a not a form of the State should not lead us to embracing some form of mass or direct democracy.

The first attempt would be to conjoin ‘democracy’ directly to mass political activity; not to the statist configuration, but to that which is most immediately antagonistic to it. For mass political activity or the spontaneous mobilization of the masses, generally comes about through an anti-statist drive. This has provided the syntagm, romantic in my view, of mass democracy, and an opposition between mass democracy and formal democracy, or democracy as a figure of the State.¹⁷

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11 Badiou 2012, p. 97.

12 Badiou 2005.

13 Badiou 2005, p. 79.

14 Badiou 2005, p. 79-80.

15 Badiou 2005, p. 84.

16 Badiou 2005, p. 85.

17 Badiou 2005, p. 88.

For Badiou mass democracy, in phenomena such mass gatherings, assemblies, riots etc, can be easily reversible to mass dictatorship. This is based on the fact that ‘the essence of mass democracy actually yields a mass sovereignty, and mass sovereignty is a sovereignty of immediacy, thus of the gathering itself.’¹⁸ Badiou explicitly turns to Sartre and the dialectical modalities of the ‘group – in – fusion’ and particularly the revolutionary group. In the same manner that Sartre insisted that “[t]he only contradiction between the characteristics which are so often opposed to one another by reactionary writers – Hope and Terror, sovereign Freedom in everyone and Violence against the Other, both outside and inside the group – is a dialectical one’.¹⁹ The same point is practically repeated by Badiou: ‘There is an organic correlation between the practice of mass democracy as an internal principle of the group-in-fusion and a point of reversibility with the immediately authoritarian or dictatorial element at work in terroristic-fraternity’.²⁰ For Badiou the only way out of this ‘democracy/dictatorship dyad that resists elementary designation’,²¹ is to think in terms of the radical anti-statism of generic communism. Marxists could accept the notion of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’, because there were ‘points of reversibility between democracy and dictatorship which assumed the historical figure of mass democracy, or revolutionary democracy, or romantic democracy’.²² However, Badiou leaves a space open for a reconceptualization of democracy. De-linked from the State and any politics associated with the State, democracy ‘would be organically bound to the universality of the political prescription, or to its universal capacity’.²³ This could establish a different relation between democracy and politics, it ‘would allow for an intrinsically democratic characterization of politics to the extent that, quite obviously, politics would be self-determined as a space of emancipation subtracted from the consensual figures of the State’.²⁴ Through a re-reading of Rousseau’s particular conception of the relation

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18 Badiou 2005, p. 88.

19 Sartre 2004, pp, 406-407.

20 Badiou 2005, p. 89.

21 Badiou 2005, p. 89.

22 Badiou 2005, p. 90.

23 Badiou 2005, p. 90.

24 Badiou 2005, p. 90.

between sovereignty and democracy in the establishment of government, Badiou insists on this conception of democracy as universality of political prescription, in an attempt to free politics from its subordination to the State. 'Democracy could thus be defined as that which authorizes a placement of the particular under the law of the universality of the political will'.²⁵ And this for Badiou is linked to equality: 'democracy as a philosophical category is that which *presents equality*'.²⁶

From all these it becomes obvious that for Badiou does not designate some form of political procedure or process of taking decisions. It refers to an egalitarian form of collective politics, erupting as an expression of an insurrectionary general will of the oppressed and to a political demand for equality and emancipation. That is why for Badiou the mass riot or the mass gathering is put on the same level with the mass assembly. One might say that in contrast to a procedural conception of democratic decision making, here we are dealing with a *performative* practice of emancipation. What is also important is that this kind of democratic politics as a politics of the universality of political prescription is also linked to the Truth of a particular situation and eventual site. A democratic politics is a politics that inscribes itself to this Truth. However, this inscription to this Truth is not determined by a democratic process of discussion, deliberation or decision.

2. A platonic critique of democracy

At the same time, Badiou repeatedly criticizes the current use of notion of democracy, and particularly the direct association of 'democracy' to the contemporary version of a liberal-parliamentary regime for advanced capitalist economies, what Badiou terms 'capitalo-parliamentarism'. In light of this definition of democracy, Badiou goes back to Plato's criticism of democracy and the platonic theme that 'crucial traits of the democratic type are egoism and desire for petty enjoyment'.²⁷ Although Badiou admits that Plato was politically conservative and nostalgic of a potential return to a more aristocratic form of politics, however he insists on the validity of the Platonic position that 'the only thing that constitutes the democratic subject is pleasure or, more precisely, pleasure-seeking

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²⁵ Badiou 2005, p. 92.

²⁶ Badiou 2005, p. 93.

²⁷ Badiou 2011, p. 8.

behavior'.²⁸ Badiou links Plato's criticism of democracy as imposition of an artificial equality upon things unequal, which Badiou defines as a 'world of universal substitutability',²⁹ to the pseudo-equality of generalized commodity and money exchanges in contemporary capitalist societies, along with consumerism and hedonism associated with neoliberal capitalism

What defines the homo democraticus trained into this anarchy is that he or she as subject reflects the substitutability of everything for everything else. So we have the overt circulation of desires, of the objects on which these desires fix, and of the cheap thrills they deliver, and it's within this circulation that the subject is constituted. And as I said, in senescence our subject, blasé by now, comes to accept a certain interexchangeability of those objects, as a boost to circulation (or 'modernization'). All he or she can really make out any more are the numbers, the quantities of money in circulation.³⁰

Therefore for Badiou, in contemporary capitalist societies 'democracy' as a battle-cry of the dominant social forces, equals the demand for what we could describe as a generalization of capitalist market practices plus the generalized prescription of a compulsive 'youthful' pleasure seeking. Therefore the opposite of 'democracy' is

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28 Badiou 2011, p. 9.

29 Badiou 2011, p. 11.

30 Badiou 2011, p. 11. Badiou's dialogue with the Platonic criticism of democracy is most obvious in his rewriting, or adapting in contemporary terms of a passage from Plato's *Republic* (book 8, 561d): "Democratic man lives only for the pure present, transient desire is his only law Today he regales himself with a fourcourse dinner and vintage wine, tomorrow he is all about Buddha, ascetic fasting, streams of crystal-clear water, and sustainable development. Monday he tries to get back in shape by pedalling for hours on a stationary bicycle; Tuesday he sleeps all day, then smokes and gorges again in the evening. Wednesday he declares that he is going to read some philosophy, but prefers doing nothing in the end. At Thursdays dinner party he crackles with zeal for politics, fumes indignantly at the next persons opinion, and heatedly denounces the society of consumption and spectacle. That evening he goes to see a Ridley Scott blockbuster about medieval warriors. Back home, he falls to sleep and dreams of liberating oppressed peoples by force of arms. Next morning he goes to work, feeling distinctly seedy, and tries without success to seduce the secretary from the office next door. He's been turning things over and has made up his mind to get into real estate and go for the big money But now the weekend has arrived, and this economic crisis isn't going away, so next week will be soon enough for all that. There you have a life, or lifestyle, or lifeworld, or whatever you want to call it: no order, no ideas, but nothing too disagreeable or distressing either. It is as free as it is uninsignifying, and insignificance isn't too high a price to pay for freedom." (Badiou 2011, p. 13).

a form of collective politics that goes beyond both the State and the dominance of the global capitalist market, a politics that aims at the extinction of the State.

[I]f democracy equals monetary abstraction equals an organized death wish, then its opposite is hardly despotism or “totalitarianism.” Real opposition is the desire to set collective existence free of the grip of this organization. Negatively, that means the order of circulation must no longer be that of money, nor the order of accumulation that of capital. [...]Politics will not be subordinated to power, to the State. It is, it will be, the force in the breast of the assembled and active people driving the State and its laws to extinction.³¹

That is why Badiou concludes this Platonic criticism of democracy as a capitalist liberal emblem with a lineage between democracy and communism. This means going back ‘to the literal meaning of democracy’,³² as a politics of collective self-emancipation, a communist politics. ‘From that perspective, we will only ever be true democrats, integral to the historic life of peoples, when we become communists again’.³³

However, this acceptance of some reference to democracy does not mean that Badiou has abandoned his critique of most forms of democracy. He still has a very negative view towards any form of electoral democracy and he discards the principle of universal suffrage

I must tell you that I absolutely do not respect universal suffrage in itself; it depends upon what it does. Is universal suffrage the only thing we should respect, regardless of what it produces? And why is that? [...] Universal suffrage has produced a number of abominations. In history competent majorities have legitimized Hitler and Pétain, the Algerian War, the invasion of Iraq.³⁴

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31 Badiou 2011, p. 14.

32 Badiou 2011, p. 15.

33 Badiou 2011, p. 15.

34 Badiou 2008, p. 32.

Badiou is not alone in this critique of the limits of universal suffrage. Luciano Canfora in his *Democracy in Europe. A History of an Ideology*³⁵ has offered a wide ranging history of the democratic form and has placed particular emphasis on all the particular moments that universal suffrage did not avert reactionary developments. In a similar line Badiou draws a sharp line of demarcation between any form of parliamentary or in general representative democracy and the communist hypothesis: 'from the beginning the communist hypothesis in no way coincided with the 'democratic' hypothesis that would lead to present-day parliamentarism'.³⁶

If these references offer a support of a criticism of parliamentary democracy and of the particular form of representation in liberal democracies, is there some other form of democracy, compatible with the 'communist hypothesis'? As Daniel Bensaïd noted,³⁷ Badiou does not provide an actual answer to what should follow the destruction of the bourgeois State, what form of democratic politics are appropriate to the 'communist hypothesis'. This is particularly evident in Badiou's 2003 text on the Paris Commune Badiou praises the Commune's steps towards the 'destruction of State bureaucracy'.³⁸ He also stresses the ambiguity of the classical Marxist and Leninist reference to the Commune through the subsequent formulation of the centrality of the party-state: 'retroactively thought through the party-state, the Commune is reducible to two parameters: first, to its *social* determination (workers); and second, to a heroic but defective exercise of *power*'.³⁹ However, when it comes to actually discuss its political content, its particular form of doing politics, of establishing different forms and norms of democratic politics, Badiou remains relatively silent, despite criticizing Marx for deploring incapacities 'that are actually statist incapacities'.⁴⁰

3. The critique of democracy in the Marxist tradition

After this partial rereading of some aspects of Badiou's critique of

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35 Canfora 2006.

36 Badiou 2008, p. 100-1.

37 Bensaïd 2011, p. 24.

38 Badiou 2006, p. 263.

39 Badiou 2006, pp. 264-65.

40 Badiou 2006, p. 262.

democracy, we can now attempt to offer a critique of his positions. First of all, we must stress that this ambiguity towards democracy as a political form has been an essential aspect of the Marxist tradition, especially since Marx, from the beginning also attempted a critique of politics. Marx in his criticism of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* insists on democratic elections as an advance even in the sense of bringing forward the contradictions of bourgeois societies: 'The representative constitution is a great advance, since it is the *frank, undistorted, consistent* expression of the *modern condition of the state*. It is an *unconcealed contradiction*'.⁴¹ Moreover, Marx thinks of a radical democratic politics that leads to a new socialization of politics and politicization of society.

Civil society is *actual* political society. In this case, it is nonsense to raise a demand which has risen only from the notion of the political state as a phenomenon separated from civil society, which has arisen only from the *theological notion* of the political state. In this situation the significance of *legislative power* as a *representative power* completely disappears. The legislative power is representation here in the sense in which *every* function is representative – in the sense in which, e.g., the shoemaker, insofar as he satisfies a social need, is my representative, in which every particular social activity as a species-activity merely represents the species, i.e., an attribute of my own nature, and in which every person is the representative of any other. He is here representative not because of something else which he represents but because of what he *is* and *does*.⁴²

However, soon afterwards, in 1844, Marx formulates in the *Jewish Question* a strong critique of any version of political emancipation that does not also include social transformation and emancipation. For Marx the political revolutions of the bourgeois era also led to a full development of capitalist social practice. 'Throwing off the political yoke meant at the same time throwing off the bonds which restrained the egoistic spirit of civil society. Political emancipation was at the same time the emancipation of civil society from politics, from having even

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41 Marx-Engels 1975, p. 75.

42 Marx-Engels 1975, p. 119.

the *semblance* of a universal content'.⁴³ From this point onwards this critique of political forms became a major aspect of Marx's theoretical and political endeavor. Political rights and democratic political forms without radical social change and transformation of capitalist social relations of property and exploitation can have little relative value and can also function as means for mystification and legitimization of capitalist exploitation. This is particularly evident in the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* where Marx confronts the fact that democratic electoral procedures can also be used as means to legitimize the strengthening of domination and exploitation. At the same time, when Marx is confronted with the experience of the Paris Commune, an experience that actually helped him reformulate the very concept of the dictatorship of the proletariat, the emphasis is both on the destruction of the oppressive State apparatus and also and on the emergence of novel *democratic* forms, based on universal suffrage, full eligibility and full revocability, open and equal deliberation and procedure, absence of any privilege for elected officials:

The Commune was formed of the municipal councillors, chosen by universal suffrage in the various wards of the town, responsible and revocable at short terms. The majority of its members were naturally working men, or acknowledged representatives of the working class. The Commune was to be a working, not a parliamentary body, executive and legislative at the same time. [...] The vested interests and the representation allowances of the high dignitaries of state disappeared along with the high dignitaries themselves. Public functions ceased to be the private property of the tools of the Central Government. Not only municipal administration, but the whole initiative hitherto exercised by the state was laid into the hands of the Commune. [...] The rural communities of every district were to administer their common affairs by an assembly of delegates in the central town, and these district assemblies were again to send deputies to the National Delegation in Paris, each delegate to be at any time revocable and bound by the *mandat impératif* (formal instructions) of his constituents.⁴⁴

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43 Marx – Engels 1975, p. 166.

44 Marx 1871.

In the *Critique of the Gotha Program* Marx defends the need for a *revolutionary dictatorship*, explicitly distinguishing it from the *democratic republic* as a set of demands for the capitalist societies of his time and opposing to the confusing demand for a *free state* that was included in the Gotha program of the German Social-democracy. However, this does not mean the Marx denied the crucial democratic aspects of the experience of the Commune; he stressed the need to think of a democracy beyond parliamentarism. Lenin rereading Marx's writings on the Paris Commune, in *State and Revolution*, grasps this need to rethink the politics of *proletarian democracy*.

The Commune substitutes for the venal and rotten parliamentarism of bourgeois society institutions in which freedom of opinion and discussion does not degenerate into deception, for the parliamentarians themselves have to work, have to execute their own laws, have themselves to test the results achieved in reality, and to account directly to their constituents. Representative institutions remain, but there is no parliamentarism here as a special system, as the division of labor between the legislative and the executive, as a privileged position for the deputies. We cannot imagine democracy, even proletarian democracy, without representative institutions, but we can and must imagine democracy without parliamentarism, if criticism of bourgeois society is not mere words for us.⁴⁵

At the same time, Lenin stresses that as part of a process of revolutionary transformation, this withering away of the State means an expansion of democratic principles outside the political sphere. Revocable representation, deliberation and collective decision, must also be the fundamental aspects of a different organization of social production and only in this way can the need for a 'specialized' state apparatus be diminished.

We, the workers, shall organize large-scale production on the basis of what capitalism has already created, relying on our own experience as workers, establishing strict, iron discipline backed up by the state power of the armed workers.

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45 Lenin 1918.

We shall reduce the role of state officials to that of simply carrying out our instructions as responsible, revocable, modestly paid “foremen and accountants” (of course, with the aid of technicians of all sorts, types and degrees). [...] Such a beginning, on the basis of large-scale production, will of itself lead to the gradual “withering away” of all bureaucracy, to the gradual creation of an order--an order without inverted commas, an order bearing no similarity to wage slavery--an order under which the functions of control and accounting, becoming more and more simple, will be performed by each in turn, will then become a habit and will finally die out as the special functions of a special section of the population.⁴⁶

Although Lenin could not easily offer a answer to how this could be accomplished, and despite his oscillation between an emphasis on the abolition of the social division of labour and socialization of knowledge and an emphasis on a certain collective efficiency of well organized and simplified procedures (exemplified in the famous exemplified in the remarks to the postal service as a model), it is obvious that he was thinking of the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat in terms of an expansion of democratic forms and in particularly in terms of thinking of democratic forms not only regarding the ‘political sphere’ but also the ‘economic sphere’. This expansion of revolutionary democratic politics into the realm of production, this radical politicization of the supposedly neutral or ‘technical’ realm of production, is a crucial aspect of this initial conception of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Of course such a return to textual sources cannot function as a solution; especially since these references were followed by more than seven decades during which ‘socialism’ was associated, at least for long periods with the suppression of mass democratic practices. However, I used these references to the classics as a means to highlight that in the tradition of Marxism there has always been such an emphasis on democracy as an integral aspect of the revolutionary process.

4. The distrust of democracy

At the same time, Badiou’s distrust of democracy is not limited – at least in my reading – to the ideological and political role of liberal parliamentary democracy. It is also – and this is the reason for his

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⁴⁶ Lenin 1918.

recurring Platonic references – a distrust of democracy *per se*. This distrust is not a priori unfounded. From the beginning of political philosophy, in Ancient Athens, the crucial question was: how can we entrust government and important decisions to people that are ignorant, lack knowledge, are guided by ideological opinion and can be manipulated by demagogues. Both Plato's and Aristotle's unease towards democracy and democratic opinion was based upon such assumptions. One can think of the projection of such a position to the contradictions of contemporary mass democracies and the forms of ideological misrecognition associated with the reproduction of bourgeois rule. And this can easily lead in the end to a mistrust of the masses themselves and –through a pattern that marked the evolution of 'historical communism in the 20th century – consequently to a politics of the Party as the vanguard that "knows best".

This is coupled with a certain tension between this conception of the masses inevitable ideological manipulation with the exaltation of the masses and especially the proletarian masses as the ontological ground of communist politics. This is a tension that runs through the history of Marxism – the few writers that have attempted to go beyond it, such as Jacques Rancière,⁴⁷ usually also dispense with the notion of the Party and any form of organized vanguard – and is more than evident in the work of Badiou, who at the same time celebrates the mass riot and laments the mass manipulation by capitalo-parliamentarism. Badiou's solution to this tendency, namely the temporal and ontological difference in intensity between insurrectionary sequences and periods of normality, in my opinion falls short of offering an answer, mainly because it fails to put the crucial question: how can we think of the masses in their insurrectionary potential and in their ability to be manipulated, at the same time insisting that a politics of emancipation is based upon the projection of their resistances, and not some normative ideal imposed upon social reality.

5. Democracy, liberalism and bourgeois hegemony

And this must also be put in historical perspective. One of the problems of Badiou's linking of democracy to parliamentarism is that it forgets the very historicity of modern political forms. Domenico Losurdo's *Liberalism. A Counter-History*⁴⁸ offers ample evidence of the inherently

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47 Rancière 1991; Rancière 2010.

48 Losurdo 2011.

undemocratic character of liberalism and of the support given by the theorists of classical liberalism to oppressive an undemocratic political configuration. Moreover, it is always necessary to remember that democratic institutions would not have been introduced without the political pressure of the subaltern classes and above all the working class, in a long history of political struggles.

The fact that in the end the institutions of universal suffrage and parliamentary representation ‘functioned’ in favour of the bourgeoisie was itself the result of a history of social and political antagonisms and how the apparatuses of bourgeois hegemony changed and adapted to the development of the labor movement. This led to the establishment of a political mechanism structurally disjoined from actual social practices and intrinsically linked to electing parties of the State, turning as Althusser stressed, the whole political ‘system’ into an Ideological State Apparatus:

What permits [...] to talk about the “political system” as a “State *ideological* apparatus”, is the *fiction* that corresponds to “a certain reality”, namely that the pieces of this system and its principle of functioning are based upon *the ideology of “freedom”* and “equality” of the individual voter, on the “free choice” of those that will represent the people by the individuals in relation to the *idea* that every individual has about the policy that the State must follow.⁴⁹

Therefore, it was exactly a long history of social and political struggles that led to the emergence of modern parliamentarism, with the emphasis on individuation (the voter as individual not as representative of his class position), distance between elected officials and voters and above all the subsumption of politics within the strict limits of dominant capitalist strategies and their inscription in the materiality of the modern state. It is this history that can explain how the democratic impetus of the subaltern classes was incorporated into the functioning of bourgeois hegemonic apparatuses, especially in the period of the bourgeois passive revolution.⁵⁰ And this can indeed to the possibility that *‘politics itself can*

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49 Althusser 1995, p. 259.

50 Gramsci 1971.

become the 'mask' of politics'.⁵¹ Part of this historical process, has been the many ways the 'dominant ideology' was based not so much upon the projection of the "bourgeois worldview" and more on the incorporation / transformation of ideological aspirations of the subaltern classes. As Balibar has noted it is exactly this 'universalistic' aspect of ideological domination that characterizes the functioning of hegemony:

The necessary condition for an ideology to become dominant is that it should elaborate the values and claims of the 'social majority' become the discourse of the *dominated* [...] 'Society' or the dominant forces in society, can speak to the masses in the language of universalistic values (rights, justice, equality, welfare, progress...), because in this language a kernel remains which came from the masses themselves, and is returned to them.⁵²

6. Democracy as a communist project

Explaining the transformation of 'democratic institutions' into integral aspects of bourgeois class domination and in parts of the bourgeois hegemonic apparatus, is not enough. We must always stress the constant effectivity of the practices, discourses and aspirations of the subaltern classes, not in the sense of the proletariat as a 'messianic' social force entering the historical scene, but more in the sense of the results and traces, the cracks and ruptures causes by the multiple singular resistances of the subaltern classes, exactly that kind of social effectivity that Badiou's ontology of the event fails to register because of the focus mainly on the insurrectionary sequence. As Mario Tronti stressed in 1964, with an optimism that might sound paradoxical today, 'at the points where capital's power appears most dominant, there it is more deeply penetrated by this threat of the working class'.⁵³

In such a perspective, what is at stake is exactly a different practice of politics, *democratic* politics associated with the communist project. As Balibar in his reading of Marx's and Engels' confrontation with the Paris

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51 Balibar 1994, p. 165.

52 Balibar 2002, p. 164.

53 Tronti 2006, p. 87.

Commune, as *rectification* of the *Communist Manifesto*,⁵⁴ the challenge is exactly to think not just of politics and the State, but of a different *practice of proletarian politics*. And as again Balibar again noted this means an

original practice of politics that is *not less but more* 'democratic', than that incarnated by the pluralism of the representative institutions of the bourgeois State itself; to make the revolutionary party at the same time the means to take power and to exercise it in an new fashion; therefore to surpass progressively within its ranks the 'division of manual and intellectual labour', the opposition between 'those who govern and those that are governed'.⁵⁵

Therefore instead of Badiou's oscillation between an exaltation of the insurrectionary potential expressed in times of historic riots and the Platonic lamentation of mass hypnotization by the dominant capitalist *doxa*, that forms the theoretical foundation for his mistrust of democracy, we must try and rethink of *democratic practices*, within movements and everyday struggles, as exactly the means both to bring forward the political potential of popular initiatives and also to materialize a possible subaltern (counter)hegemony. And this means, contrary to Platonic fears of mass ideological manipulation, that the masses have always something important to say, however contradictorily they articulate it; that communist politics must begin by paying attention to the imagination, inventiveness, collective ingenuity of the masses. And as Althusser stressed, this means '*restoring their voice to the masses* who make history. Not just putting oneself 'at the service of the masses' (a slogan which may be pretty reactionary), but *opening one's ears to them*, studying and understanding their aspirations and their contradictions, their aspirations in their contradictions, learning how to be attentive to the masses' imagination and inventiveness'.⁵⁶ This is also based on the possibility of communism emerging not as a normative political ideal, but as an actual tendency within current social relations and antagonism, tendency materialized exactly in the collective *democratic* practices of the masses, namely their forms of autonomous organization

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54 Balibar 1974.

55 Balibar (1982) 1999, p. 1139.

56 Althusser 1977, p. 11.

Marx thinks of communism as a *tendency* of capitalist society. This tendency is not an abstract result. It already exists, in a concrete form in the “interstices of capitalist society” (a little bit like commodity relations existing “in the interstices” of slave or feudal society), virtual forms of communism, in the associations that manage [...] to avoid commodity relations.⁵⁷

Therefore, we need to rethink the importance of mass democratic practices in contemporary movements and the current sequence of struggles. The call for ‘real democracy’ is not just a misguided demand for radical political change. It also encapsulates one of the crucial prerequisites for communist politics today. The mass assembly as the main form of organization, the open discussion, the emphasis on decisions being made democratically, the emphasis on collective representation and revocability, the distrust of ‘leadership’, the emphasis on horizontal coordination and building democratic networks instead of top-down traditional hierarchical fronts, all these concrete experimentations with new forms of democracy-in-struggle are indispensable aspects of communist politics. Instead of a Platonic mistrust of such democratic practices, we need a more optimist Spinozist insistence that in the end it is ‘practically impossible for the majority of a single assembly, if it is of some size, to agree on the same piece of folly’.⁵⁸

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57 Althusser 1998, p. 285.

58 Spinoza 2002, p. 530.

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