

Alain Badiou and Marcel Gauchet, *What Is To Be Done? A Dialogue on Communism, Capitalism, and the Future of Democracy* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2016)

Translated from the French by Susan Spitzer, this book reports three sessions held in 2014 and moderated by Martin Duru and Martin Legros, during which two of the most celebrated French philosophers of our time discuss the future of democratic institutions. Alain Badiou, perhaps the more famous of the two, offers a defence and reinterpretation of communism. Marcel Gauchet, instead, outlines a social-democratic approach. Their differences and disagreements are palpable and vocal; they are nothing short of “battle lines” (66). Both, however, agree on the utter and cruel untenability of capitalism, especially after the collapse of international finance in 2008 and the many years of austerity imposed upon the innocent for the sake of keeping a broken system afloat at any cost.

While Badiou became a communist after being raised and being active in a social-democratic milieu, Gauchet followed exactly the “opposite” itinerary (3): he began his life as a political activist and a scholar in the communist camp, but later moved to the social-democratic one. Philosophy was always a central concern for them both. Rousseau, Marx, Sartre and structuralism are the shared influences of Badiou and Gauchet, who do not seem to fully realise in their exchanges how much they both have been trying to recover the notion of a meaningful human subjectivity *vis-à-vis* the seemingly objective “linguistic, economic, and psychic structures” into which the successful structuralist schools of thought of their youth had dissolved it (12).

As concerns the idea or hypothesis of communism, which both thinkers distinguish from its historical manifestations, Marx and Lenin are regarded as the key-references on the subject. Their reciprocal continuity in thought is, *grosso modo*, agreed upon, while disagreement starts unfolding more clearly between Badiou and Gauchet with regard to the particular historical consequences that the successful 1917 Bolshevik revolution had for Russia and the world at large. Gauchet stresses the “totalitarian” character of the Soviet experience that emerged thereof, very similar in this to the fascist experiences of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of which reveal how the great hopes of 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century modernity in popular self-rule—the “*autonomous* mode of structuration”—produced so many novel conflicts in practice and engendered such a dismay in theory that a return to the “*heteronomous* mode of structuration” characterising pre-modern religious societies was sought once again, though by novel and terrifying political means (16-17).

Badiou, on his part, stresses the profound differences between Russian communism and the fascist experiences and fascist experiments, which both thinkers believe will never “happen again” (66), as well as those inherent to the communist camp (Soviet Russia and “the People’s Republic of China” in particular; 35). Unlike the fascist countries, these communist nations were far less unified internally, and whatever despotic, tyrannical or totalitarian character may be attributed to them has more to do with the traditional “criminal

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dimension” of State power than with communism as such (39). It may be rhetorically commonplace to list “the number of victims” of communist revolutions and regimes, as Gauchet eventually does, but Badiou believes it to be a cheap trick, given the far worse human losses caused by liberal revolutions and capitalist horrors, such as “colonial wars and global conflicts” such as the so-called Great War (44). It is curious, as Badiou notes, that such horrors are never used to disqualify liberal, republican and parliamentary principles; only communist death tolls are, to disqualify the communist hypothesis.

History, however, cannot have the last word about communism. Both authors agree on this point. Seventy years of Soviet history cannot be in any logical sense the means for the decisive refutation of a much older and far more general hypothesis. Nobody would use the much-longer terrors of “the Spanish Inquisition” in order to reject the Christian religion or religion *per se* (48). “Moving monolithically and violently from private property to state ownership”, as it was done in Soviet Russia, may have been a major mistake, but “local, progressive, multi-layered experiments” can, have been and are being tried all over the world (e.g. workers’ “self-management”, 119-120). Badiou and Gauchet agree also on the chief characteristics of communism that they derive from Marx, i.e.: “the conviction that it is possible to extricate the becoming of all humanity from the evil grip of capitalism” (50); “the hypothesis that the state... is not a natural, inevitable form of the structuration of human society” (51); and the claim “that the division of labor... is in no way absolute necessity for organizing economic production.” (51) Additionally, Badiou emphasises “four teachings” of Marx that he regards as crucial to comprehend the communist hypothesis and the possibility of its success: “communists are... directly involved in a pre-existing general movement that they’ll later be responsible for directing” (52); “the bearers of the communist Idea are characterized by an ability to communicate what the next step is” (53); which “must follow an internationalist logic” (54); and “a global strategic vision... whose matrix is anti-capitalism.” (54)

If the communist Idea or hypothesis—both expressions appear frequently in the book—can be separated from historical events and circumstances, so does Gauchet believe that “democracy” can be distinguished from “capital’s control over it”, which is certainly the sad norm in today’s societies (69). According to him, “democratic pluralism” can be a fruitful means of progress and “moderation”, especially when it comes to smoothing strong differences of interests and opinions by including “opposition” rather than fighting it violently (72). This time, history can teach useful lessons, according to him. “[T]he Thirty Glorious Years” following World War II and displaying strong unions, political participation, redistributive progressive taxation and financial regulation are still a case worth studying, though it should never turn into a “blind faith in the progress of capitalism” which, rather,

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can be modified and civilised (78). The post-1970s culture of individualism, on the one hand, and global “financial liberalization”, on the other hand, show also that modifications can occur which make capitalism more barbaric (82).

Badiou is, under this respect, most sceptical. Individualism and globalisation are, in his view, of the essence; without them, capitalism would cease to exist. Today’s world, marked by astounding inequalities and planet-wide eco-destruction, is nothing new under the sun. It is “the normal, that is, imperial, state of capitalism” (89), in which big powers compete for resources and opportunities at the service of “the financial oligarchy” benefitting from it (101). Even major financial crashes are part of it, whether we look at the 1920s or the 2000s. Badiou finds simply absurd Gauchet’s notions that today’s polycentric capitalism is somehow essentially different, that parliamentary institutions and liberal conceptions have changed substantially, and that piecemeal reformist alternatives may be open within the current global order (e.g. business accounting standards, 114). Gauchet’s “de-imperialization” and “veritable neoliberalism” sound catchy; but they are, according to Badiou, mere slogans (109-110). Party politics, parliaments and liberal institutions in general do not grant genuine chances for “the individual to become a subject”, namely an authentically autonomous person, and even less so do capitalist economies based upon individuals’ manufactured “personal appetites” and superficial “petty freedoms” that do not challenge the status quo (136-137).

In the end, Badiou and Gauchet find an uneasy terrain for agreement: political tactics aimed at defying and defeating “the financial oligarchy’s overwhelming power” (140). On the one hand, communists like Badiou can be active and can be heard in their polity thanks to the democratic institutions that Gauchet defends. On the other hand, a strong and vocal movement promoting communism can “scare the hell out of” the financial oligarchs and lead them to accept compromises that could make societies more democratic, more prosperous, more egalitarian and less oppressive (148).

The debates reported in this book are lively and interesting. The readership familiar with Badiou’s and/or Gauchet’s writings will find some of their better-known theses formulated or exemplified in mundane terms and charged with a lively tone that is not typical of their usual, stately academic prose. The readership unfamiliar with the two French thinkers, instead, will find a wealth of clever considerations, insights and informed short arguments. As to the future of democracy, or of the communist Idea, history alone can and shall tell.

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