

The Spectre of Communism is Not Haunting Psychology

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Abstract. *In the last few years a number of thinkers have been advancing the idea/s of communism, or the “new” communism as it is often put; for instance, the recent work of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, Boris Groys, Jacques Rancière, Bruno Bosteels, and Jodi Dean amongst others. There are many reasons for the resurgence of interest in promoting the idea of the “new” communism: the breakup of the Soviet Union; the defeat and decline of many left parties, especially socialist ones; the recent crises of capitalism and the current European debt crisis; the challenge and excitement generated by the Occupy “movement”. And yet, according to Antonia Birnbaum, objectively there are no “real forces or conflicts that directly call for a reappraisal of communism”. Given that over the last 20 years, and especially the last few years (of capitalist crisis after capitalist crisis), critical psychology has not been a particularly vocal nor articulate critic of life under capitalism, this paper will explore some of the implications of the ideas of the “new” communism as a critique of the ravaging consequences of contemporary capitalism, as well as what might be pre-figured for a different theory and practice of psychology.*

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Many Marxists would be delighted to hear that the spectre of communism is *not* haunting psychology. Communism has been the subject of quite a lot of bad press, and in many societal instances deservedly so. And furthermore, many Marxists would claim that communist societies, and the societies of what were called “actually existing socialism” were a very poor example of “Marxism in practice.” In short, where Marxism might still retain some respectability (amongst left intellectuals), communism has mostly been discredited, especially if viewed from the *practice* of many extant communist parties. Where I come from, even the South African Communist Party doesn’t talk about communism, which is not that surprising seeing as they don’t really speak about socialism either! Along with the Chinese Communist Party, the South African Communist Party is not a communist party at all, but in its *practices*, a pro-capitalist party.

It is true that a commitment to Marxist analysis, and especially a politics informed by Marxism, is not inherently connected to the social outcome of a communist society. It might also seem somewhat presumptuous to be discussing communism, especially given how far off the political agenda it is. As Antonia Birnbaum (2011) wrote recently: “In the immediate

conjuncture, there are no real forces or conflicts that directly call for a reappraisal of communism. However, certain questions linked to its reappraisal do appear to be at stake in conflicts that are taking place” (p. 21). So, it might be wondered, what the point is of raising (the spectre of) communism, given that it is clearly *not* haunting psychology. However, I would contend that we – *Marxists in psychology* – don’t seem to talk enough about the *nature* of society, and especially the (future) society that we would like to bring about, and closely linked to this, we don’t talk or write enough about *politics*. It seems that as Marxists, and Marxists in psychology, we should talk about the nature of society, that is, *current* social relations, and *future social relations*; that we should also talk about politics, and especially the politics of emancipation and transformation; that we should talk about alienation; that we should talk about ideology and subjectivity; and that we should talk about methodology and theory.

Marxism, the New Communism, and Psychology

The commentary here will be limited to a brief discussion concerning the nature of society, and about politics, or the political. The range of recent texts, as

well as the conferences on communism, raise some critical and potentially exciting questions about the nature of current conflicts, and how we might want to engage with them as Marxists in psychology (see for instance, Badiou, 2008; 2009; 2010; Bosteels, 2011; Douzinas & Žižek, 2010; Groys, 2009; Žižek, 2009). It is noteworthy that in these forums there has been little participation from psychology, even the left in psychology.

While it might be true that a commitment to Marxism (in psychology, or other disciplines for that matter) does not necessarily entail a commitment to the development of communism, the obverse isn't true. For historical and conjunctural reasons, one can't really talk about communism *without* talking about Marxism. And Marxists in psychology still need to critically discuss the appropriation of Marxist theory and practice, and the implications this has for the theory and practice of a psychology that is in the service of the common good. But, be this as it may, in the meantime it is possible to suggest some areas where there could be general agreement about what we might want to think about as people with an interest in Marxism and psychology. For instance, it seems that an interest in Marxism and psychology would include *at least* the following:

- a concern to fight against the de-politicisation of psychology and psychological matters, both practically and theoretically;
- a critique of the deformatory and alienating effects of capitalism on everyday life;
- a certain scepticism towards the notion that Marxism has a soteriological role to play in psychology;
- the development of a materialist theory of subjectivity;
- an interest in prefiguring "something like" a communist society.

If it is too bold and problematic to suggest that we should think about a different, non-capitalist society being "something like" a communist society, then we at least have to think about what kinds of social relations would need to pertain for people to flourish, and for the eradication of most forms of inequality.

Life under Capitalism

However, it seems that *Marxists in psychology*, at a conjunctural level at least, need to do two things: the first is to study (and criticise) the effects of life under capitalism for ordinary people; and the second is to

identify and imagine alternative societal and collective arrangements that would make our lives less miserable, less alienating, and more filled with a sense of commitment to what is "in common," filled with hope and joy, and love.

Quite a lot has been written about the former (the psychological effects of life under capitalism), even starting with Freud. And while Freud was not a self-conscious social theorist, and generally a pessimist regarding the possibilities of transforming the human condition, he was not unaware of the effects of different forms of social life on the psyche, and especially with regard to the processes of repression. For example, his *Civilisation and its discontents* (1930) is a marvellous account of what "we give up" to become part of our society, or of "what the costs of being socialised" are. And earlier even, in the first lecture of his *Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis* (1916-1917), Freud writes: "We believe that civilization has been created under the pressure of the exigencies of life at the cost of satisfaction of the instincts [drives – GH] .. [and] .. each individual who makes a fresh entry into human society repeats this sacrifice of instinctual [drive – GH] satisfaction for the benefit of the whole community" (Freud, 1991, p. 47). So Freud, and many of the other early psychoanalysts (for example, Otto Fenichel, Wilhelm Reich, Lou Andreas-Salomé) were interested in the intersection of the social and the individual, and how the structuring of the unconscious was affected by this. We would do well to keep mining this rich tradition of "social analysis" in psychoanalysis's (early) history, without succumbing to its defeatism regarding the possibilities of social and human transformation. The history of psychoanalysis shows us that a strong universalising and clinical trend dominated, and still dominates, at the expense of a more socially articulated account of our (inner) lives. The tradition of a social psychoanalysis was most forcefully taken up by the theoreticians of the Frankfurt School. The Frankfurt School theorists, from the more radical Marcuse to the humanistic Erich Fromm, used psychoanalytic concepts to analyse (and criticise) life under capitalism. The nature of capitalism of the 1950s through to the 1970s (in the USA), and the then focus on a growing consumerism, is quite a different animal to the capitalist beast that currently "terrorises" much of the planet. The tradition inaugurated by the Frankfurt School continues as evidenced by a range of people currently working within a critical theory perspective, on the social and psychological analysis of contemporary social problems, from a psychoanalytic and non-psychoanalytic perspective (for instance, cf. Alford, 1989; Kelly Oliver, 2004; Sloan, 1996; Whitebook, 1996).

The other impressive tradition of social psychoanalytic work is of course that emanating from Lacanian influenced social theorists and Marxists. This is not the place to assess the impressive range and depth of Lacano-Marxist work on the social ills of our societies, but instead to raise two concerns or points for discussion regarding some of this work.

Firstly, many of these studies are not conjunctural, that is, they tend not to be empirical analyses of specific social problems and issues. These studies and writings tend to be overly theoretical, and/or philosophical. Their accounts are often too general, and not specific enough. This is not intended as some mindless critique of theoretical work, on the contrary I am particularly interested to get us to *think* about what our practices (theoretical and empirical) are, and what they amount to. This is also not some disengaged critique from a theoretical or moral high ground that I am lucky to inhabit, and by implication others don't. For example, a recent piece of my own work is precisely guilty of this problem of being too theoretical and too general, and too un-political (see my chapter, entitled, "Desire in the time of AIDS," published in Aydan Gulerce's edited (2012) collection (Re)configuring psychoanalysis). The point of mentioning this work is not some act of hubris, but rather should be read as a self-critique that explicates the *symptomatic* nature of much left analysis, in psychology, and elsewhere for that matter (see Bosteels, 2011). In other words, it is worth asking, why is it that politically engaged work ends up being so un-political? What are the structural and political reasons that inhibit a clear or explicit political focus? The answers to these kinds of questions will be common across many different sites of analysis, and yet the particular or local instances of "inhibition" or political quietude will be revealing. For instance, in South Africa, organised and professional psychology offers very little critique of the workings of the society. There are at least two reasons for this: one is that many psychologists occupy an uncritical bourgeois class position and thus they "don't notice" what the problems of society are that affect the majority of poor and working class people; and the second reason has to do with the very vexed issue of how "race" operates in post-apartheid South Africa, and what it would mean (especially for black psychologists) to criticise the policy and practices of the (black majority) ANC government.

This "lack" of specific conjunctural analyses leads to the second concern that the overly theoretical nature of our work, or maybe more accurately, the current *nature* of our theoretical work, ironically ends up being quite politically impotent, or at least easily

disregarded as not having any bearing on pressing social issues. The response of many capitalist countries to the deep-seated malaise of contemporary capitalism is to operate seemingly within the law, and yet beyond the law. Increasingly, the capitalist state in many countries, as per norm, functions as a "state of exception" (cf. Agamben, 2005; Bauman, 2011). Besides the insecurities and vulnerabilities that this creates, it also makes it very difficult to be, to act, politically. Already in the mid-1980s Ulrich Beck (1992) pointed out that individuals, in what he called "risk society," are expected to seek *biographical* or personal solutions to systemic contradictions. Capitalism, as a social system, takes no responsibility for people's mental health, and prefers to see these problems as "natural facts" (cf. Fisher, 2009, p. 19), as the unchanging way of the world. A recent study by Davies (2011) points to the inextricable link between the political economy of capitalism and current levels of depression. Quoting mental health statistics since 1996, Davies (2011) notes that "we might say that if 'immaterial' labour is now the hegemonic form of production, depression is the hegemonic form of incapacity" (p. 67). Furthermore, he suggests that "[u]nhappiness has become the critical negative externality of contemporary capitalism" (Davies, 2011, p. 68). And as many commentators have noted, this "unhappiness" manifests itself as mental health problems, mostly depression, as well as a generalised form of anxiety brought on by the insecurity of everyday life under neo-liberal capitalism – and especially that persistent anxiety of never finding a job! (cf. Neocleous, 2011). Capitalism finds itself increasingly within the clutches of a contradiction that it can't resolve, namely that while it "produces" millions of unhappy, depressed, and anxious subjects, it at the same time implores us all to enjoy the "benefits" of life under capitalism: consume, enjoy, be happy! This contradiction is in part responsible for the widespread anti-capitalist protests around the world, as well as other forms of resistance to social inequality, exploitation and oppression as seen for example in the uprisings in the Arab Spring countries, the Occupy movement's "indictment" of the 1%, the resistance to imposed austerity measures in the Eurozone, and not to forget the almost daily protests regarding the lack of basic service delivery in South Africa.

The Return of the Political

Bauman (2000) has forcefully argued that there is a growing gap in modern life (or what he prefers to call

“liquid modernity”) between the condition of the individual *de jure* and their chances to become individuals *de facto*. This gap is also what accounts for the alienation and insecurity experienced by many people these days. Bauman (cf. 2000, p. 39) contends that the reasons for this are that the public space(s) of social life have become individualised, and that increasingly public spaces are less public, and colonised by life-politics and other forms of privatisation. Ironically it is the public realm, politics with a Capital P, that needs to be re-claimed, re-built to ensure the chances for individuals to be (to “become individuals *de facto*”). For Bauman (2000) this is the role and task of critical theory as it critiques life-politics, the privatisation of the public realm, and secures the public realm as a space for collectivity and the *de facto* becoming of individuals. Thus being political, at least in the sense of ordinary people participating in decisions that affect how their lives are organised, and lived, has become fraught with difficulties. What constitutes “legitimate” politics now has become incredibly narrow, and circumscribed. And yet there are openings, there are windows to look through for alternatives. But a massive problem confronts us, and that is knowing how to think differently about the *politics* of our work, and move closer to more egalitarian modes of association. Birnbaum (2012) captures this most eloquently when she notes that “Even in the struggles that do take place, there is an enormous, almost insurmountable difficulty in subjectively stepping out of the capitalist framework. So, another symptom: the more frenetically we search for the place-holders of communist aspirations, the more these aspirations seem to fall back into formal, purely potential, even speculative modes” (p. 21).

The tendency to fall back into “speculative modes,” or rather, what Bosteels calls “speculative leftism” (following Jacques Rancière – cf. Bosteels, 2011, p. 23), is what concerns him in his critique of recent work about communism, the communist hypothesis, and the idea of communism, and simultaneously Bosteels wants to salvage the meaning of communism as “something more than a utopia for beautiful souls” (ibid., p. 19). Bosteels (2011, p. 15) is not averse to seeing the future actuality of communism as an “impossible possibility,” or as Badiou and Žižek suggest as the “art of the impossible.” What the “actuality” of Bosteels’s communism entails is taking seriously the history of communism, what *actually* existed under this name, as well as looking for *actual* possible alternatives in the present so as to build a communism of and for the future. Bosteels (2011) writes: “It is with an eye on understanding the relation between the actual and the possible that [...] I will

study a series of thinkers and trends that all somehow claim to contribute to the reinvigoration of a tradition of thought for the Left” (p. 40). He notes that these radical leftist writers also “propose that a socialist or communist mode of doing politics must necessarily pass through the detour of a prior ontological investigation into the very being of politics” (ibid., p. 40). Bosteels starts the first (“The ontological turn”) of the five chapters that make up his book with this project of ontology. Suggestively what is contained in these reflections about ontology is to think about the *subject* of and for politics, that is, an ontology of (the political) being. And for psychology a materialist ontology of being that is recovered from the fractured and fragmented identities under capitalism, together with the imagined (and immanent) possibilities of an emancipated and flourishing human being under the new communism.

Writing about the invention of communism in the early Marx, Birnbaum (2012) makes a related point when she asks: “How does the dominant feature in Marx’s communism – class antagonism – connect with the associative, fraternal moment?” (p. 22). The actuality of communism in this instance is the political struggle against capitalist exploitation, the struggle of one class, proletarians, against another class, the bourgeoisie or capitalist class. This is one irreducible moment of communism, the persistent political struggle against class exploitation for the benefit of the *whole* of society. The other moment is grasping whom the being is that “emerges” in the associative, fraternal and social dynamics of struggle. What I am alluding to here is the Marxist notion of the transformative nature of practice, both for theory and practical living: social beings (proletarians) violently fighting against the violence of capital, and doing this in a common and comradesly way. Holding the tension of antagonism and struggle with the sharing “inherent to communist aspirations” seems what unites many writers, from Marx through to Žižek, Badiou, Bosteels, and others.

These are complex matters about the political ontology of being in the (communist) struggle against capitalism, and are invoked in their negativity as ideological interpellations of the various subject positions of everyday life, and in their positivity as creating the “new person,” the emancipated social being, or the “beautiful souls” envisaged by communism. Although often dismissed as “immature,” or too humanistic, some of Marx’s early work, namely the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), and even the later reflections on the Paris Commune (1871), would be a fruitful place for us to start (re-)thinking

the ontology and politics of the person under communism.

The New Communism: Badiou and Žižek

I want briefly now to refer to the work of two of the “big names” currently promoting the communist idea and the communist hypothesis: Slavoj Žižek, and Alain Badiou. For instance, Žižek (2009) notes that, “If communism really is an ‘eternal’ Idea, then it works as a Hegelian ‘concrete universality’: it is eternal not in the sense of a series of abstract-universal features that may be applied everywhere, but in the sense that *it has to be re-invented in each new historical situation*” (p. 6, emphases added). Is it preposterous to suggest that Marxists in psychology might find something worthy in *re-inventing* what communism might mean for us, here, now? Why is it that psychology is not one of the most critical disciplines of capitalist excesses and barbarity, everywhere, and consequently, at least, simultaneously adumbrating an alternative social order? Some answers to psychology’s silence regarding the ravages of life under capitalism, from “within psychology,” are advanced by Ian Parker’s (2007) important text, *Revolution in psychology*, where he elaborates the various forms of subjectivity that maintain the status quo. He poignantly reveals psychology’s imbrication with capitalism, both epistemologically and ontologically, when he writes, “A close analysis of the development of psychology can actually enable us to understand something about the nature of alienation in capitalist society and the role of different forms of oppression within it” (Parker, 2007, p. 5). And again, “capitalist society is exploitative and alienating, and for sure it intensifies individual experience, but it also constitutes that individual experience as something ‘psychological’, as something that operates as if it were inside each person” (ibid.).

And “outside of psychology” Slavoj Žižek (2010) is frequently at pains to point out the functioning of capitalist ideology, and how ideology operates under capitalism to keep us content and docile. While we need to continue to expose and critique psychology’s complicity in oiling the creaking machinery of contemporary capitalism, we should also be giving some thought to joining in the discussions about communism, and what it might mean to be a person in a society free from the constraints of capitalist social relations. However, the *name* of communism is still shocking, still spectral, still haunting! We should note that haunting also means evocative, memorable, stirring, unforgettable. The real of communism, the actual as Bosteels (2011) calls it, or the past history of

communism *should* haunt us as we try to hold a dialectical tension between “the two names of communism” (see Roberts, 2012). The two names refer to “communism as a (failed) political tradition and set of strategies, and communism as an (emergent) emancipatory theory” (Roberts, 2012, p. 9). Many participants in the discussions of the “new” communism are keen to “remove” the stain of failed political practices of state communism from communism’s name. Developing this argument somewhat Roberts (2012) writes: “The new name of communism in politics must *subtract* itself from history, from any notion that the remnants of a revolutionary tradition represents a feint red line of ‘progress towards’ (as if we were now ‘back on track’). The re-engagement of philosophy and politics emerges as a *constitutive break* with both a failed Communism and a failed capitalist state. Without this break, there is no process of renaming/unnaming” (p. 12, emphases added).

The troubling question is of course, *how* do we subtract ourselves from history, and constitutively *break* with the failures of communism and capitalism? This sounds at least too large a set of things to do, assuming even that we might know how to subtract communism from its history. Furthermore, this strikes me as a form of speculative leftism that wants to “clean up” politics via philosophy, rather than engage with the politico-philosophical, and the politico-psychological dynamics of the haunted history of the two names of communism. The only way we might “subtract” communism from its history, is by engaging its problematic history, remembering also that not *all* of its history was problematic, and ensuring that we knowingly create a different communist future, a future as always becoming.

In a related vein, Badiou (2008: 34-35) poses the question: “What is the communist hypothesis?” and answers: “In its generic sense, [...] ‘communist’ means, first, that the logic of class – [...] is not inevitable; *it can be overcome*. The communist hypothesis is that *a different collective organization is practicable*, one that will eliminate the inequality of wealth and even the division of labour. The private appropriation of massive fortunes and their transmission by inheritance will disappear” (pp. 34-35, emphases added). This is not some starry-eyed plug for the communist utopia, as both Žižek and Badiou are painfully aware of what is at stake. It is because of the success of capitalist ideology that we so easily imagine that there is no alternative (TINA), or that the alternative to capitalism is too horrific to imagine – and for capitalists the end of capitalism *is* too horrific to imagine. Žižek (2009) points to two consequences of doing nothing, of accepting defeat. The first is about the

Left itself, and he writes: “There is a real possibility that the main victim of the ongoing crisis will not be capitalism but the Left itself, insofar as its inability to offer a viable global alternative was again made visible to everyone. It was the Left which was effectively caught out. It is as if recent events were staged with a calculated risk in order to demonstrate that, even at a time of shattering crisis, there is no viable alternative to capitalism” (Žižek, 2009, p. 16). The challenges facing us in thinking about alternatives to capitalism, both in theory and practice, are quite daunting; and yet as Žižek remarks right at the end of his book, it is time for us to get serious again about what communism might mean. For millions of people around the world things are so bad under actually existing capitalism, that we have no choice but to get serious about imagining a different future. And in any case, it seems that the faint outlines of an alternative are immanent in many of the critiques and refusals of the anti-capitalist movement, and other social and political struggles of a more local nature, and even in our theoretical work.

The second, even gloomier, consequence of the Left’s inertia that Žižek points to is the ruling class asserting itself in ever more brutal and violent ways, and we are not short of examples of this going on everywhere: for example, the current South African government’s violent responses to protests about the lack of basic services; the militaristic surveillance of public space in London during the Olympics in July 2012; the racist attacks on African immigrants in Greece; and on and on. As Žižek (2009) says, “The primary immediate effect of the crisis will not be the rise of a radical emancipatory politics, but rather the rise of racist populism, further wars, increased poverty in the poorest Third World countries, and greater divisions between the rich and the poor within all societies” (p. 17). This sounds very much like Žižek had contemporary South Africa in mind, where the ruling, pro-capitalist ANC government, erstwhile revolutionaries, struggles to deliver a better life to ordinary poor and working class people, and often resort to (anti-white) racist populism as an “explanation” for the failures of redistribution and social equality.

Badiou’s (2008) diagnosis of the malaise of 21st century capitalism and its history is considerably darker than Žižek’s, and yet at the same time he offers a politics of hope. Capturing the “dialectics of disaster” as a necessary “preface to hope,” to use Ronald Aronson’s (1983) evocative phrases, is important lest we hope in the dark, or worse, lapse into a politics of the will (voluntarism) without any critical reason. And so to conclude with a comment from Badiou (2008) where he suggests that we seem a lot closer to

the conditions of the 19th century: “A wide variety of 19th-century phenomena are reappearing: vast zones of poverty, widening inequalities, politics dissolved into the ‘service of wealth’, the nihilism of large sections of the young; the servility of much of the intelligentsia; the cramped, besieged experimentalism of a few groups seeking ways to express the communist hypothesis ... [and so] ... [t]his is our task, during the reactionary interlude that now prevails: through the combination of thought processes – always global, or universal, in character – and political experience, always local and singular, yet transmissible, to renew the existence of the communist hypothesis, in our consciousness and on the ground” (pp. 41-42, emphases added).

For psychology not to be haunted by the spectre of communism, we might want to engage with what a “new” consciousness might amount to that is not subject to selfish forms of individualism, and to disengage the notion of what a person is from the determinations of socialisation under capitalism. Part of this project of renewing the conditions for communism is for us to critically engage with the discussions of the communist idea and what this might mean for, and in, psychology. As Badiou (2008) has suggested, it requires that we hold a dialectical tension between the *political experience* of our everyday lives and struggles, and the *development of critical ideas* that help us make sense of our world and how to transcend it. Parker (2007) notes that “[r]evolutionary changes require social and personal change that prefigures a better world, and this means that detailed analysis, reflection and theory have always been necessary; this analysis, reflection and theory should not be *mistaken for psychology*, however” (p. 6, emphases added). The other part of the project of renewal requires a political engagement, “on the ground” as it were, with the social reality of everyday life in the hope of creating an egalitarian society and the conditions for the flourishing of social being.

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