problem is rather to return – prior to this first account (prior to Lenin, if you will) – to what was alive but defeated in the Commune: to the fact that a politics appears when a declaration is at one and the same time a decision as to the consequences, and, thus, when a decision is active in the form of a previously unknown collective discipline. Because we must never stop recalling that those who are nothing can only stick to a wager on the consequences of their appearing in the element of a new discipline, a discipline that is a practical discipline of thought. The Party in Lenin’s sense certainly comprised the creation of such a discipline, but one that was ultimately subordinated to constraints of State. Today’s task, being undertaken notably by the Organisation Politique, is to support the creation of such a discipline subtracted from the grip of the state, the creation of a thoroughly political discipline.

IV

The Idea of Communism

My aim today is to describe a conceptual operation to which, for reasons that I hope will be convincing, I will give the name ‘the Idea of communism’. No doubt the trickiest part of this construction is the most general one, the one that involves explaining what an Idea is, not just with respect to political truths (in which case the Idea is that of communism) but with respect to any truth (in which case the Idea is a modern version of what Plato attempted to convey to us under the names of eidos, or idea, or even more precisely the Idea of the Good). I will leave a good deal of this generality implicit,¹ in

¹ The theme of the Idea appears gradually in my work. It was no doubt already present in the late ’80s from the moment when, in Manifesto for Philosophy, I designated my undertaking as a ‘Platonism of the multiple’, which would require a renewed investigation into the nature of the Idea. In Logics of Worlds, this investigation was expressed
order to be as clear as possible regarding the Idea of communism.

Three basic elements – a political, a historical and a subjective one – are needed for the operation of ‘the Idea of communism’.

First, the political element. This concerns what I call a truth, a political truth. Regarding my analysis of the Chinese Cultural Revolution (a political truth if ever there was one), one reviewer for a British newspaper remarked – merely from noting my positive account of this episode of Chinese history (which he of

as an imperative: ‘true life’ was conceived of as life lived in accordance with the Idea, as opposed to the maxim of contemporary democratic materialism, which commands us to live without any Idea. I examined the logic of the Idea in greater detail in Second Manifesto for Philosophy, in which the notion of ideation, and thus of the operative, or working, value of the Idea is introduced. This was backed up by a multifaceted commitment to something like a renaissance of the use of Plato. For example: my seminar, which for the past two years has been entitled ‘For today: Plato!’; my film project, The Life of Plato; and my complete translation (which I call a ‘hypertranslation’) of The Republic, renamed Du Communi(isme) and redivided into nine chapters, which I hope to complete and publish in 2010.

course regards as a sinister, bloody catastrophe) – that it was ‘not hard to feel a certain pride in workaday Anglo-Saxon empiricism, which inoculates us [the readers of the Observer] against the tyranny of pure political abstraction’. 2 He was basically taking pride in the fact that the dominant imperative in the world today is ‘Live without an Idea’. So, to please him, I will begin by saying that a political truth can, after all, be described in a purely empirical way: it is a concrete, time-specific sequence in which a new thought and a new practice of collective emancipation arise, exist, and eventually disappear. 3 Some examples of this can

3 The rarity of politics, in the guise of sequences destined for an immanent end, is very powerfully argued by Sylvain Lazarus in his book L’Anthropologie du Nom (Seuil, 1996). He calls these sequences ‘historical modes of politics’, which are defined by a certain type of relationship between a politics and its thought. My philosophical elaboration of a truth procedure would appear to be very different from this (the concepts of event and genericity are completely absent from Lazarus’s thought). I explained in Logics of Worlds why my philosophical enterprise is nevertheless compatible with Lazarus’s, which puts forward a thought of politics elaborated
even be given: the French Revolution, from 1792 to 1794; the People's War of Liberation in China, from 1927 to 1949; Bolshevism in Russia, from 1902 to 1917; and – unfortunately for the Observer's critic, although he probably won't like my other examples all that much either – the Great Cultural Revolution, at any rate from 1965 to 1968. That said, formally, that is, philosophically, I am speaking about a truth procedure here, in the sense that I have been giving this term since Being and Event. I'll come back to this shortly. But let's note right away that every truth procedure prescribes a Subject of this truth, a Subject who – even empirically – cannot be reduced to an individual.

Now for the historical element. As the time frame of political sequences clearly shows, a truth procedure is inscribed in the general becoming of Humanity, in a local form whose supports are spatial, temporal and anthropological. Designations such as 'French' or 'Chinese' are the empirical indices of this localization.

They make it clear why Sylvain Lazarus speaks of 'historical modes of politics', not simply of 'modes'. There is in fact a historical dimension of a truth, although the latter is in the final analysis universal (in the sense that I give this term in my Ethics book, for example, or in my Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism or eternal (as I prefer to put it in Logics of Worlds or in my Second Manifesto for Philosophy). In particular, we will see that, within a given type of truth (political, but also amorous, artistic or scientific), the historical inscription encompasses an interplay between types of truth that are different from one another and are therefore situated at different points in human time in general. In particular, there are retroactive effects of one truth on other truths that were created before it. All this requires a transtemporal availability of truths.

And finally, the subjective element. What is at issue is the possibility for an individual, defined as a mere human animal, and clearly distinct from any Subject, to decide⁴ to become part of a political truth

---

⁴ This aspect of decision, of choice, of the Will, in which the Idea involves an individual commitment, is increasingly
procedure. To become, in a nutshell, a militant of this truth. In *Logics of Worlds*, and in a simpler manner in the *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, I describe this decision as an incorporation: the individual body and all that it entails in terms of thought, affects, potentialities at work in it, and so forth, becomes one of the elements of another body, the body-of-truth, the material existence of a truth in the making in a given world. This is the moment when an individual declares that he or she can go beyond the bounds (of selfishness, competition, finitude . . .) set by individualism (or animality – they’re one and the same thing). He or she can do so to the extent that, while remaining the individual that he or she is, he or she can also become, through incorporation, an active part of a new Subject. I call this decision, this will, a subjectivation.\(^5\) More generally speaking, a subjectivation is always the process whereby an individual determines the place of a truth with respect to his or her own vital existence and to the world in which this existence is lived out.

I call an ‘Idea’ an abstract totalization of the three basic elements: a truth procedure, a belonging to history, and an individual subjectivation. A formal definition of the Idea can immediately be given: an Idea is the subjectivation of an interplay between the singularity of a truth procedure and a representation of History.

In the case that concerns us here, we will say that an Idea is the possibility for an individual to understand that his or her participation in a singular political process (his or her entry into a body-of-truth) is also, in a certain way, a *historical* decision. Thanks to the Idea, the individual, as an element of the new Subject, realizes his or her belonging to the movement of History. For about two centuries (from Babeuf’s ‘community of equals’ to the 1980s), the word

---

5 In my *Théorie du Sujet*, published in 1982, the couple formed by subjectivation and the subjective process plays a fundamental role. This is an additional sign of my tendency, as Bruno Bosteels contends in his work (including his English translation of the book, recently published with a remarkable commentary on it), to return little by little to some of the dialectical intuitions of that book.
‘communism’ was the most important name of an Idea located in the field of emancipatory, or revolutionary, politics. To be a communist was of course to be a militant of a Communist Party in a given country. But to be a militant of a Communist Party was also to be one of millions of agents of a historical orientation of all of Humanity. In the context of the Idea of communism, subjectivation constituted the link between the local belonging to a political procedure and the huge symbolic domain of Humanity’s forward march towards its collective emancipation. To give out a leaflet in a marketplace was also to mount the stage of History.

So it is clear why the word ‘communism’ cannot be a purely political name: for the individual whose subjectivation it supports, it effectively connects the political procedure to something other than itself. Nor can it be a purely historical term. This is because, lacking the actual political procedure, which, as we shall see, contains an irreducible element of contingency, History is but empty symbolism. And finally, it cannot be a purely subjective, or ideological, word either. For subjectivation operates ‘between’ politics and history, between singularity and the projection of this singularity into a symbolic whole and, without such materialities and symbolizations, it cannot attain the status of a decision. The word ‘communism’ has the status of an Idea, meaning that, once an incorporation has taken place, hence from within a political subjectivation, this term denotes a synthesis of politics, history and ideology. That is why it is better understood as an operation than as a concept. The communist Idea exists only at the border between the individual and the political procedure, as that element of subjectivation that is based on a historical projection of politics. The communist Idea is what constitutes the becoming-political Subject of the individual as also and at the same time his or her projection into History.

If only so as to move towards the philosophical turf of my friend Slavoj Žižek, I think it might help to

6 Slavoj Žižek is probably the only thinker today who can simultaneously hew as closely as possible to Lacan’s contributions and argue steadfastly and vigorously for the return of the Idea of communism. This is because his real master is Hegel, of whom he offers an interpretation that is completely novel, inasmuch as he has given up subordinating it to the theme of Totality. There are two ways of rescuing
clarify things by formalizing the operation of the Idea in general, and of the communist Idea in particular, in the register of Lacan’s three orders of the Subject: the real, the imaginary and the symbolic. First, we will posit that the truth procedure itself is the real on which the Idea is based. Next, we will allow that History exists only symbolically. In effect, it cannot appear. In order to appear, belonging to a world is necessary. However, History, as the alleged totality of human becoming, has no world that can locate it in an actual existence. It is a narrative constructed after the fact. Finally, we will grant that subjectivation, which projects the real into the symbolic of a History, can only be imaginary, for one major reason: no real can be symbolized as such. The real exists, in a given world, and under very specific conditions that I will come back to later. However, as Lacan said over and over, it is unsymbolizable. So the real of a truth procedure cannot be ‘really’ projected into the narrative symbolism of History. It can be so only imaginarily, which doesn’t mean – far from it – that this is useless, negative, or ineffective. On the contrary, it is in the operation of the Idea that the individual finds the capacity to consist ‘as a Subject’.7 We will therefore assert the following: the Idea exposes a truth in a fictional structure. In the specific case of the communist Idea, which is operative when the truth it deals with is an emancipatory political sequence, we will claim that ‘communism’ exposes this sequence (and consequently its militants) in the symbolic order of History. In other words, the communist Idea is the imaginary operation whereby an individual subjectivation projects a fragment of the political real into the symbolic narrative of a History.

7 To live ‘as a Subject’ can be taken in two ways. The first is like ‘to live as an Immortal’, a maxim translated from Aristotle. ‘As’ means ‘as if one were’. The second way is topological: incorporation in effect means that the individual lives ‘in’ the subject-body of a truth. These nuances are clarified by the theory of the body-of-truth on which Logics of Worlds concludes, a decisive conclusion but, I must admit, one that is still too condensed and abrupt.
It is in this sense that one may appropriately say that the Idea is (as might be expected!) ideological.\(^8\)

It is essential today to understand that ‘communist’ can no longer be the adjective qualifying a politics. An entire century of experiences both epic in scope and appalling was required to understand that certain phrases produced by this short-circuiting between the real and the Idea were misconceived, phrases such as ‘Communist Party’ or ‘Communist State’ – an oxymoron that the phrase ‘Socialist State’ attempted to get around. The long-term effects of the Hegelian origins of Marxism are evident in this short-circuiting. For Hegel in fact, the historical exposure of politics was not an imaginary subjectivation, it was the real as such. This was because the crucial axiom of the dialectic as he conceived of it was: ‘The True is the process of its own becoming’ or – what amounts to the same – ‘Time is the being-there of the concept’. As a result, in line with the Hegelian philosophical heritage, we are justified in thinking that, under the name of ‘communism’, the historical inscription of revolutionary political sequences or of the disparate fragments of collective emancipation reveals their truth: to move forward according to the meaning of History. This latent subordination of truths to their historical meaning entails that we can speak ‘in truth’ of communist politics, communist parties and communist militants. It is clear, however, that we need to avoid any such ‘adjectification’ today. To combat such a thing, I have many times had to insist that History does not exist, which is in keeping with my conception of truths, namely, that they have no meaning, and especially not the meaning of History. But I need to clarify this verdict today. Of course, there is no real of History and it is therefore true, transcendentally true, that it cannot exist. Discontinuity between worlds is the law of appearance, hence of existence. What does exist, however, under the real condition of organized political action, is the communist Idea, an operation tied to intellectual subjectivation and that integrates the real, the symbolic and the ideological at the level of the individual. We must bring this Idea back, by uncoupling it from any predicative

\(^8\) Basically, if you really want to understand the tired-out word ‘ideology’, the simplest thing to do is to stay as close as possible to its derivation: something can be said to be ‘ideological’ when it has to do with an Idea.
usage. We must rescue the Idea, but also free the real from any immediate fusion with it. Only political sequences that it would ultimately be absurd to label as communist can be recovered by the communist Idea as the potential force of the becoming-Subject of individuals.

So we must begin with truths, with the political real, in order to define the Idea in terms of the threefold nature of its operation: politics-real, history-symbolic and ideology-imaginary.

Let me begin by reminding you of a few of my usual concepts, in a very abstract, simple form.

I call an ‘event’ a rupture in the normal order of bodies and languages as it exists for any particular situation (if you refer to Being and Event [1988] or Manifesto for Philosophy [1989]) or as it appears in any particular world (if you refer instead to Logics of Worlds [2006] or the Second Manifesto for Philosophy [2009]). What is important to note here is that an event is not the realization of a possibility that resides within the situation or that is dependent on the transcendental laws of the world. An event is the creation of new possibilities. It is located not merely at the level of objective possibilities but at the level of the possibility of possibilities. Another way of putting this is: with respect to a situation or a world, an event paves the way for the possibility of what – from the limited perspective of the make-up of this situation or the legality of this world – is strictly impossible. If we keep in mind here that, for Lacan, the real = the impossible, the intrinsically real aspect of the event will be readily seen. We might also say that an event is the occurrence of the real as its own future possibility.

I call a ‘State’ or ‘state of the situation’ the system of constraints that limit the possibility of possibilities. By the same token, we will say that the State is that which prescribes what, in a given situation, is the impossibility specific to that situation, from the perspective of the formal prescription of what is possible. The State is always the finitude of possibility, and the event is its infinitization. For example, what is the State comprised of today with regard to its political possibilities? Well, the capitalist economy, the constitutional form of government, the laws (in the juridical sense) concerning property and inheritance, the army, the police... Through all these systems, all these apparatuses, including, of course, those
that Althusser called 'ideological State apparatuses', which could be defined by their one common goal – preventing the communist Idea from designating a possibility – we can see how the State organizes and maintains, often by force, the distinction between what is possible and what isn't. It follows clearly from this that an event is something that can occur only to the extent that it is subtracted from the power of the State.

I call a 'truth procedure' or a 'truth' an ongoing organization, in a given situation (or world), of the consequences of an event. It will be noted at once that a fundamental randomness, that of its eventual origins, partakes in every truth. I call 'facts' the consequences of the existence of the State. It will be observed that intrinsic necessity is always on the side of the State. So it is clear that a truth cannot be made up of pure facts. The non-factual element in a truth is a function of its orientation, and this will be termed subjective. We will also say that the material 'body' of a truth, in so far as it is subjectively oriented, is an exceptional body. Making unabashed use of a religious metaphor, I will say that the body-of-truth, as concerns what cannot be reduced to facts within it, can be called a glorious body. With respect to this body, which is that of a new collective Subject in politics, of an organization composed of individual multiples, we will say that it shares in the creation of a political truth. In the case of the State of the world in which this creation is at work, we will speak of historical facts. History as such, made up of historical facts, is in no way subtracted from the power of the State. History is neither subjective nor glorious. History should instead be said to be the history of the State. 9

So we can now return to our subject, the communist Idea. If, for an individual, an Idea is the subjective operation whereby a specific real truth is imaginarily projected into the symbolic movement of a History, we can say that an Idea presents the truth as if it were a fact.

9 That history is the history of the State is a thesis introduced into the field of political speculation by Sylvain Lazarus, but he has not yet published all its consequences. Here, too, one could say that my ontologico-philosophical concept of the State, as it was introduced in the mid-'80s, is distinguished by a different (mathematical) point of departure and a different (metapolitical) destination. However, its compatibility with Lazarus's is confirmed in one major regard: no political truth procedure can be confused, in its very essence, with the historical actions of a State.
In other words, the Idea presents certain facts as symbols of the real of truth. This was how the Idea of communism allowed revolutionary politics and its parties to be inscribed in the representation of a meaning of History the inevitable outcome of which was communism. Or how it became possible to speak of a ‘homeland of socialism’, which amounted to symbolizing the creation of a possibility – which is fragile by definition – through the magnitude of a power. The Idea, which is an operative mediation between the real and the symbolic, always presents the individual with something that is located between the event and the fact. That is why the endless debates about the real status of the communist Idea are irresolvable. Is it a question of a regulative Idea, in Kant’s sense of the term, having no real efficacy but able to set reasonable goals for our understanding? Or is it an agenda that must be carried out over time through a new post-revolutionary State’s action on the world? Is it a utopia, if not a plainly dangerous, and even criminal, one? Or is it the name of Reason in History? This type of debate can never be concluded for the simple reason that the subjective operation of the Idea is not simple but complex. It involves real sequences of emancipatory politics as its essential real condition, but it also presupposes marshalling a whole range of historical facts suitable for symbolization. It does not claim (as this would amount to subjecting the truth procedure to the laws of the State) that the event and its organized political consequences are reducible to facts. But neither does it claim that the facts are unsuitable for any historical transcription (to make a Lacanian sort of play on words) of the distinctive characters of a truth. The Idea is a historical anchoring of everything elusive, slippery and evanescent in the becoming of a truth. But it can only be so if it admits as its own real this aleatory, elusive, slippery, evanescent dimension. That is why it is incumbent upon the communist Idea to respond to the question ‘Where do correct ideas come from?’ the way Mao did; ‘correct ideas’ (and by this I mean what constitutes the path of a truth in a situation) come from practice. ‘Practice’ should obviously be understood as the materialist name of the real. It would thus be appropriate to say that the Idea that symbolizes the becoming ‘in truth’ of correct (political) ideas in History, that is to say, the Idea of communism, therefore comes itself from the idea of practice (from the experience of the real) in the final analysis but can nevertheless not be reduced to it. This is because it is the protocol not
of the existence but rather of the *exposure* of a truth in action.

All of the foregoing explains, and to a certain extent justifies, why it was ultimately possible to go to the extreme of exposing the truths of emancipatory politics in the guise of their opposite, that is to say, in the guise of a State. Since it is a question of an (imaginary) ideological relationship between a truth procedure and historical facts, why hesitate to push this relationship to its limit? Why not say that it is a matter of a relationship between event and State? *State and Revolution:* that is the title of one of Lenin’s most famous texts. And the State and the Event are indeed what are at stake in it. Nevertheless, Lenin, following Marx in this regard, is careful to say that the State in question after the Revolution will have to be the State of the withering away of the State, the State as organizer of the transition to the non-State. So let’s say the following: The Idea of communism can project the real of a politics, subtracted as ever from the power of the State, into the figure of ‘another State’, provided that the subtraction lies within this subjectivating operation, in the sense that the ‘other State’ is also subtracted from the power of the State, hence from its own power, in so far as it is a State whose essence is to wither away.

It is in this context that it is necessary to think and endorse the vital importance of proper names in all revolutionary politics. Their importance is indeed both spectacular and paradoxical. On the one hand, in effect, emancipatory politics is essentially the politics of the anonymous masses; it is the victory of those with no names,10 of those who are held in a state of colossal

10 Those who have ‘no name’, those who have ‘no part’, and ultimately, in all current political actions, the organizing role of the workers ‘without papers’ are all part of a negative, or rather stripped down, view of the human terrain of emancipatory politics. Jacques Rancière, starting in particular with his in-depth study of these themes in the nineteenth century, has specifically highlighted, in the philosophical field, the implications for democracy of not belonging to a dominant societal category. This idea actually goes back at least as far as to the Marx of the *Manuscripts of 1844*, who defined the proletariat as generic humanity, since it does not itself possess any of the properties by which the bourgeoisie defines (respectable, or normal, or ‘well-adjusted’, as we would say today) Man. This idea is the basis of Rancière’s attempt to salvage the word ‘democracy’, as is evident in his essay *The Hatred of Democracy* (Verso, 2006). I am not sure that the word can so easily be salvaged, or, at any rate, I think that making a detour through the Idea of communism is unavoidable. The debate has begun and will go on.
insignificance by the State. On the other hand, it is
distinguished all along the way by proper names,
which define it historically, which represent it, much
more forcefully than is the case for other kinds of
politics. Why is there this long series of proper names?
Why this glorious Pantheon of revolutionary heroes?
Why Spartacus, Thomas Müntzer, Robespierre,
Toussaint Louverture, Blanqui, Marx, Lenin, Rosa
Luxemburg, Mao, Che Guevara and so many others?
The reason is that all these proper names symbolize
historically – in the guise of an individual, of a
pure singularity of body and thought – the rare and
precious network of ephemeral sequences of politics
as truth. The elusive formalism of bodies-of-truth is
legible here as empirical existence. 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. Thus, proper names are
involved in the operation of the Idea, and the ones I
just mentioned are elements of the Idea of communism
at its various different stages. So let us not hesitate
to say that Khrushchev’s condemnation of ‘the cult
of personality’, apropos Stalin, was misguided, and
that, under the pretence of democracy, it heralded the
decline of the Idea of communism that we witnessed
in the ensuing decades. The political critique of
Stalin and his terrorist vision of the State needed to
be undertaken in a rigorous way, from the perspective
of revolutionary politics itself, and Mao had begun to
do as much in a number of his writings.11 Whereas
Khrushchev, who was in fact defending the group
that had led the Stalinist State, made no inroads
whatsoever as regards this issue and, when it came to
speaking of the Terror carried out under Stalin, merely
offered an abstract critique of the role of proper names
in political subjectivation. He himself thereby paved
the way for the ‘new philosophers’ of reactionary
humanism a decade later. Whence a very precious

11 Mao Zedong’s writings on Stalin were published in
the short book Mao Tsé-Toung et la construction du socialisme,
clearly subtitled ‘Modèle soviétique ou voie chinoise’,
translated and presented by Hu Chi-hsi (Seuil, 1975). Guided
by the idea of the eternity of the True, I wrote a commentary
on this book, in the preface to Logics of Worlds.
lesson: even though retroactive political actions may require that a given name be stripped of its symbolic function, this function as such cannot be eliminated for all that. For the Idea – and the communist Idea in particular, because it refers directly to the infinity of the people – needs the finitude of proper names.

Let’s recapitulate as simply as possible. A truth is the political real. History, even as a reservoir of proper names, is a symbolic place. The ideological operation of the Idea of communism is the imaginary projection of the political real into the symbolic fiction of History, including in its guise as a representation of the action of innumerable masses via the One of a proper name. The role of this Idea is to support the individual’s incorporation into the discipline of a truth procedure, to authorize the individual, in his or her own eyes, to go beyond the Statist constraints of mere survival by becoming a part of the body-of-truth, or the subjectivizable body.

We will now ask: why is it necessary to resort to this ambiguous operation? Why do the event and its consequences also have to be exposed in the guise of a fact – often a violent one – that is accompanied by different versions of the ‘cult of personality’?

What is the reason for this historical appropriation of emancipatory politics?

The simplest reason is that ordinary history, the history of individual lives, is confined within the State. The history of a life, with neither decision nor choice, is in itself a part of the history of the State, whose conventional mediations are the family, work, the homeland, property, religion, customs and so forth. The heroic, but individual, projection of an exception to all the above – as is a truth procedure – also aims at being shared with everyone else; it aims to show itself to be not only an exception but also a possibility that everyone can share from now on. And that is one of the Idea’s functions: to project the exception into the ordinary life of individuals, to fill what merely exists with a certain measure of the extraordinary. To convince my own immediate circle – husband or wife, neighbours and friends, colleagues – that the fantastic exception of truths in the making also exists, that we are not doomed to lives programmed by the constraints of the State. Naturally, in the final analysis, only the raw, or militant, experience of the truth procedure will compel one person or another’s entry into the body-of-truth. But to take him or her to the place where
this experience is to be found – to make him or her a spectator of, and therefore partly a participant in, what is important for a truth – the mediation of the Idea, the sharing of the Idea, are almost always required. The Idea of communism (regardless of what name it might otherwise be given, which hardly matters: no Idea is definable by its name) is what enables a truth procedure to be spoken in the impure language of the State and thereby for the lines of force by virtue of which the State prescribes what is possible and what is impossible to be shifted for a time. In this view of things, the most ordinary action is to take someone to a real political meeting, far from their home, far from their predetermined existential parameters, in a hostel of workers from Mali, for example, or at the gates of a factory. Once they have come to the place where politics is occurring, they will make a decision about whether to incorporate or withdraw. But in order for them to come to that place, the Idea – and for two centuries, or perhaps since Plato, it has been the Idea of communism – must have already shifted them in the order of representations, of History and of the State. The symbol must imaginarily come to the aid of the creative flight from the real. Allegorical facts must ideologize and historicize the fragility of truth. A banal yet crucial discussion with four workers and a student in an ill-lit room must momentarily be enlarged to the dimensions of Communism and thus be both what it is and what it will have been as a moment in the local construction of the True. Through the enlargement of the symbol, it must become visible that ‘just ideas’ come from this practically invisible practice. The five-person meeting in an out-of-the-way suburb must be eternal in the very expression of its precariousness. That is why the real must be exposed in a fictional structure.

The second reason is that every event is a surprise. If this were not the case, it would mean that it would have been predictable as a fact, and so would be inscribed in the History of the State, which is a contradiction in terms. The problem can thus be formulated in the following way: how can we prepare ourselves for such surprises? And this time the problem really exists, even if we are already currently militants of a previous event’s consequences, even if we are included in a body-of-truth. Granted, we are proposing the deployment of new possibilities. However, the event to come will turn what is still impossible, even for us, into a possibility.
In order to anticipate, at least ideologically, or intellectually, the creation of new possibilities, we must have an Idea. An Idea that of course involves the newness of the possibilities that the truth procedure of which we are the militants has brought to light, which are real-possibilities, but an Idea that also involves the formal possibility of other possibilities, ones as yet unsuspected by us. An Idea is always the assertion that a new truth is historically possible. And since the forcing of the impossible into the possible occurs via subtraction from the power of the State, an Idea can be said to assert that this subtractive process is infinite: it is always formally possible that the dividing line drawn by the State between the possible and the impossible may once again be shifted, however radical its previous shifts – including the one in which we as militants are currently taking part – may have been. That is why one of the contents of the communist Idea today – as opposed to the theme of communism as a goal to be attained through the work of a new State – is that the withering away of the State, while undoubtedly a principle that must be apparent in any political action (which is expressed by the formula ‘politics at a distance from the State’ as an obligatory refusal of any direct inclusion in the State, of any request for funding from the State, of any participation in elections, etc.), is also an infinite task, since the creation of new political truths will always shift the dividing line between Statist, hence historical, facts and the eternal consequences of an event.

With this in mind, I will now conclude by turning to the contemporary inflections of the Idea of communism. In keeping with the current reassessment of the Idea of communism, as I mentioned, the word's function can no longer be that of an adjective, as in ‘Communist Party’, or ‘communist regimes’. The Party-form, like that of the Socialist State, is no longer suitable for providing real support for the Idea. This problem moreover first found negative expression in two crucial events of the '60s and '70s of the last century: the Cultural Revolution in China and the amorphous entity called 'May '68' in France. Later, new political

12 On the three stages of the Idea of communism, especially the one (the second stage) during which the Idea of communism attempted to be overtly political (in the sense of the programme, of both the Party and the State), see the final chapters of my Circonstances 4, published in English as The Meaning of Sarkozy (Verso, 2008).
forms, all of which are of the order of politics without a party, were – and are still being – tried out. Overall, however, the modern, so-called ‘democratic’ form of the bourgeois State, of which globalized capitalism is the cornerstone, can boast of having no rivals in the ideological field. For three decades now, the word ‘communism’ has been either totally forgotten or practically equated with criminal enterprises. That is why the subjective situation of politics has everywhere become so incoherent. Lacking the Idea, the popular masses’s confusion is inescapable.

Nevertheless, there are many signs suggesting that this reactionary period is coming to an end. The historical paradox is that, in a certain way, we are closer to problems investigated in the first half of the nineteenth century than we are to those we have inherited from the twentieth. Just as in around 1840,

---

13 There have been numerous, fascinating experiments with new political forms over the past three decades. The following could be mentioned: the Solidarity movement in Poland in 1980–81; the first sequence of the Iranian Revolution; the Organisation Politique in France; the Zapatista movement in Mexico; the Maoists in Nepal . . . This list is not intended to be exhaustive.

today we are faced with an utterly cynical capitalism, which is certain that it is the only possible option for a rational organization of society. Everywhere it is implied that the poor are to blame for their own plight, that Africans are backward, and that the future belongs either to the ‘civilized’ bourgeoisies of the Western world or to those who, like the Japanese, choose to follow the same path. Today, just as back then, very extensive areas of extreme poverty can be found even in the rich countries. There are outrageous, widening inequalities between countries, as well as between social classes. The subjective, political gulf between Third World farmers, the unemployed and poor wage earners in our so-called ‘developed’ countries, on the one hand, and the ‘Western’ middle classes on the other, is absolutely unbridgeable and tainted with a sort of indifference bordering on hatred. More than ever, political power, as the current economic crisis with its one single slogan of ‘rescue the banks’ clearly proves, is merely an agent of capitalism. Revolutionaries are divided and only weakly organized, broad sectors of working-class youth have fallen prey to nihilistic despair, the vast majority of intellectuals are servile. In contrast to all this, as isolated as Marx and his
friends were at the time when the retrospectively famous *Manifesto of the Communist Party* came out in 1847, there are nonetheless more and more of us involved in organizing new types of political processes among the poor and working masses and in trying to find every possible way to support the re-emergent forms of the communist Idea in reality. Just as at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the victory of the communist Idea is not at issue, as it would later be, far too dangerously and dogmatically, for a whole stretch of the twentieth century. What matters first and foremost is its existence and the terms in which it is formulated. In the first place, to provide a vigorous subjective existence to the communist hypothesis is the task those of us gathered here today are attempting to accomplish in our own way. And it is, I insist, a thrilling task. By combining intellectual constructs, which are always global and universal, with experiments of fragments of truths, which are local and singular, yet universally transmittable, we can give new life to the communist hypothesis, or rather to the Idea of communism, in individual consciousnesses. We can usher in the third era of this Idea’s existence. We can, so we must.

Appendix

*Letter from Alain Badiou to Slavoj Žižek: On the Work of Mao Zedong*

Dear Slavoj,

Your introduction to the Verso edition of Mao’s philosophical-political texts is, as always, of very great interest.¹ Let me begin by refuting, as I usually do, your reputation as a showman and a conceptual poseur – a very French misrepresentation (but let’s not worry that they said the same about our master Lacan) – and by saying that your introduction is honest, profound and brave. It is honest because there is no showiness or vague rhetoric; this is an accurate expression of your very ambivalent relationship with the figure of Mao. You recognize the novelty and breadth of his vision but take the view that it is, in many essential

respects, false and dangerous. It is profound because you cut straight to the crucial and difficult question of the relationship between contemporary dialectical thought and politics. Your comments on the negation of the negation are remarkable. You explain, probably for the first time, the underlying reasons why Stalin and Mao reject that ‘law’. They fail, that is, to understand its real Hegelian meaning: any immanent negation is, in its essence, a negation of the negation that it is. Your text is, finally brave because, as so often, you lay yourself open to criticism from both sides. The counter-revolutionary descendants of our ‘new philosophers’ will scream, as they are already doing, that you and Badiou are both backward-looking, but still dangerous, supporters of a sepulchral communism. What else could the simple fact of talking about Mao mean to this new generation of watchdogs? Even so, those who remain true to what was, in the lineage of Mao, known in Europe as ‘Maoism’ – and I am probably now one of its few noteworthy representatives – will have some criticisms to make. You are familiar with this kind of ‘struggle on both fronts’, which was a basic slogan of the Cultural Revolution: the struggle against the classic bourgeoisie, whose epicentre is American imperialism, and against the new bureaucratic bourgeoisie whose epicentre was at the time the Soviet Union.

Speaking of the existence of this new bourgeoisie in China, Mao used to say that, in a socialist country, the bourgeoisie was to be found ‘right inside the Communist Party’. Given what Deng Xiaoping’s ‘reforms’ have done to China, it really can be said that his words were prophetic. It can also be said that they illustrate the extent to which Mao created a new politics of the negation of the negation, despite his own comments and your own commentaries, which are quite justified. The new negation of this process does indeed take place in the very heart of the Party, which is the acknowledged leader of the process of the destruction of the old world. That negation is now consensual: ‘bourgeoisie’, and even more so ‘new bourgeoisie’, are terms that have been banished from all official discourses of both the majority and the opposition.

This brings us to a vital methodological point and there is, I think, no disagreement of principle between us here. When it comes to figures like Robespierre, Saint-Just, Babeuf, Blanqui, Bakunin, Marx, Engels,
Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Tito, Enver Hoxha, Guevara, Castro and a few others (I am thinking of Aristide in particular), it is vital not to give any ground in the context of criminalization and hair-raising anecdotes in which the forces of reaction have always tried to wall them up and invalidate them. We can and must discuss amongst ourselves (meaning those for whom capitalism and its political forms are horrors, and for whom egalitarian emancipation is the only maxim that has any universal value) the use we make, or do not make, of these figures. The discussion may be lively, and sometimes antagonistic, but it is amongst ourselves, and the rules of the discussion imply an absolute refusal to collaborate with the adversary’s ranting. Even the establishment of the facts and historical rigour must be completely on our side. Any new book about Mao, whether officially authorized or ‘neutral’, and any sensational ‘biography’, is obviously a piece of propaganda, completely mendacious, pernicious and devoid of all interest. You cite the book by Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, which is a typical product of the genre. Bush himself, who was famous for not reading anything, avidly read, he says, a biography of Mao and learned, to his great and pathetic amazement, that Mao personally killed seventy million people, which indubitably makes him the biggest serial killer in history.

It seems to me that, when it comes to the details, you do not always get away from the image of the last great Marxist revolutionary in world history – an idea that is at once nonsensical and repellant – that our dear West propagates, and which is in fact promoted or even manipulated by the Chinese State (which is, let us remember, in the hands of those who are bent on taking revenge for the Cultural Revolution, and who have become the corrupt lords of capitalist accumulation). On the one hand, you stray too far from the extremely tense context of the international politics of the day. One cannot, for example, speak of the famous exchange of ‘food for guns’ that supposedly reduced China to starvation in the 1950s to the benefit of the USSR without recalling that, from 1950 onwards, the Chinese army was waging a full-scale war against the Americans in Korea, and that it then offered a safe haven for the Vietnamese during their 20-year war of national liberation. And nor can one speak of the experiments in mass production and the
industrialization of the countryside, including the ‘Great Leap Forward’, without evoking the split, at first latent and then explicit, with the Soviet Godfather. The split was a political necessity, and there is no denying that it was a revolutionary duty, but it did expose China to enormous dangers. The Godfather’s economic retaliation was unprecedentedly swift and forced the Chinese communists to envisage a protracted period of autarchy at the very time when they still had to prepare for war. The attempt to be ‘self-reliant’ (a vital Maoist principle) and to develop the productive forces by all means possible was, for an isolated country that was being simultaneously provoked by both superpowers, a question of survival.

I also think that you find some of the ‘cultural’ aspects of Mao’s style (such as his ‘cosmological’ vision, which is, in my view, nothing more than a set of metaphors) amusing or even fascinating, while others leave you cold. You do not, for instance, always understand the ‘peasant-style’ Chinese humour that characterizes many of Mao’s interventions (even when, joking about the number of dead, he reminds us: ‘Once a head is chopped off . . . it can’t be restored, nor can it grow back again as chives do after being cut’). The other problem is that, because your own sense of humour tends to be on the black side because it comes from the East, and because of your in-depth knowledge of the mysteries of the Stalinist regime, you are too quick to project its macabre parameters on to what is in fact the very different world of communist China. Do I have to remind you that, with the notable exception of Liu Shao Si, and probably Lin Piao, none of Mao’s sworn enemies in the Party leadership lost their lives, even when the violence of the Cultural Revolution was at its height? And that almost all of them regained their positions and their power from the mid-’70s onwards? In the long term, Deng Xiaoping, who was vilified, denounced and caricatured as ‘the number two person in authority taking the capitalist road’ — and quite rightly so, as the future was to demonstrate — became the country’s new master. What a difference from Stalin, who was obsessed with exterminating the Bolshevik ‘old guard’! That in itself reveals the huge

difference between the Cultural Revolution and the Soviet purges of the 1930s, no matter what you say to the contrary.

That, however, is not the important point. What I would like to get across to you above all else is that your definitions of the points that might raise the issue of the universality of Mao are not sufficiently rigorous. Were it not for that universality, both the publication of these texts and our commentaries — both yours and mine — would not be of the slightest interest.

Indeed, one corollary of the radical precautionary principle we have to observe in the face of the never-ending flood of counter-revolutionary propaganda, is that we must never leave the problematic field of the politics of emancipation (otherwise known as communist politics) within which we read, value or criticise the works of Mao. And, as is always the case when we are dealing with what I call ‘truth procedures’, that field is constructed on the basis of problems. It is a question of dealing with problems, suggesting theoretical and practical solutions, making mistakes and correcting them and bequeathing the results to those whom Mao, being very worried about this question, called ‘Successors for the revolutionary cause’. A few principles, a few resolved problems and a few new problems to which there is no known solution: that is why the work of the revolutionary leaders of the past is of such importance to us, and when we talk amongst ourselves, we should not be talking of anything else.

The first question must therefore be: what problems do we and Mao still have in common? In what sense is a reading of his texts anything more than an exercise in nostalgia or critique? To what extent can Mao’s texts still be a point of reference in our search for a new direction for emancipatory politics, in the sense that certain of Poincaré’s memoirs on the theory of dynamic systems are still a source of inspiration for mathematicians?

If we are to go into this question in any real sense, we must first establish our starting point, namely the period between 1925 and 1955, when Stalin’s vision was hegemonic throughout the international communist movement. It has to be remembered that its hegemony was based upon an unprecedented

---

event: the first victorious people’s revolution in Russia in October 1917. And we must constantly bear in mind that this victory – which was revenge for the workers’ insurrections crushed during the nineteenth century, including that in France – was universally attributed to the new political discipline embodied in the Leninist-style Party. As a result, everything that came after it, including the anti-Stalinist Trotskyists, was defined and shaped by the question of the class Party or the workers’ organization, if you wish to put it that way. We can therefore put it in a nutshell: the universality of Mao, assuming that it does exist, has to do with the new solutions to and/or the identification of new problems of Leninism, and therefore with the link between the political process and the Party.

Many aspects of Mao’s thought are, of course, innovative, and you mention almost all of them: the importance of the peasantry, which is so often disparaged in the name of workerist fetishism; protracted people’s war, which is essential when a short-term urban insurrection is not possible; the exceptional importance accorded to ideology and political subjectivity; the theory that there is a ‘new bourgeoisie’ inside the Communist Party and that the best way of fighting it is to rely upon the mass movement, and even the spontaneity of the masses, and not the political police or institutionalized purges; the distinction between different types of contradiction, and their immanent fluidity, and so on. But none of this could constitute a political truth in itself, had not all these themes been ultimately articulated with the central problem of the Party, defined by Stalin as the sole source of and sole actor in the process known as the ‘building of socialism’. If we fail to relate the special features of Maoism to this problem, which is in a sense the revolutionary problem of the period, we lapse into a defensive empiricism that makes too many concessions to the enemies of all egalitarian revolutions.

We can in fact find in Mao’s earliest writings, which seem to be classically Stalinist (‘Without its Communist Party, the people has nothing’), some curious reservations about anything that might give the Party a monopoly on the leadership of the popular political process. In Logics of Worlds, I make a very close analysis of this point in the work of the young Mao, which was written at the start of the people’s war
in the Chingkang mountains in 1927. According to Mao, ‘red political power’ is made up of differentiated elements, and the people’s assemblies are as important as the Party itself. And besides, it was the question of the Army that was decisive at this stage. Now, while it is true that ‘the party commands the gun’, it is also true that ‘without a people’s army, the people has nothing’, and that formula is a counter-balance to Stalin’s. Indeed, ‘The Chinese Red Army is an armed body for carrying out the political tasks of the revolution’,⁴ which implies that the Party has no monopoly on those tasks. Forty years later, during the Cultural Revolution, we will once more see ‘revolutionary committees’ and the Red Army attempting to check the all-powerful Party’s monolithic hold over relations between the mass movement and the State.

Even Mao’s dialectical thought helps to relativize the powers of the Party. For his maxim is not ‘No communism without the Communist Party’, but ‘in order to have communism there must be a Communist Party’. This means that the Party, which is the leading organ of the State and the main agency in the building of socialism, derives its legitimacy only from as complete an exposition as possible of the way it is negated by the action of the masses who rebel against it. The famous formula ‘It is right to rebel against reactionaries’ obviously means: ‘It is right to rebel against the ossified form of negation embodied in the bureaucracy of the Party-State.’

It is in this context that we must accept that there was an element of universality in the terrible failure of the Cultural Revolution. And let us remember in this context that the fact that something ends in bloody failure is not the only thing that can be said of it. Once again, you use the failure of the Cultural Revolution as a facile argument in order to deny its importance and contemporary relevance (and let us remember that Mao argued that it would take another 10 or 20 revolutions to push society in the direction of communism). Everyone knows that Lenin’s thought is grounded in his opinion of the Paris Commune, even though the workers’ revolt ended with an unprecedented massacre. Marx had already formulated the political problem raised by the Commune: given that the working class had the political ability to seize State power (and the Communards held power

---

⁴ Ibid., p. 100. Translator’s note.
in Paris for over two months), how can we ensure that the seizure of power can, first, be extended in spatial terms and, second, that it can last in temporal terms? His provisional answer, which is still too general, is that we cannot be content with seizing State power as such and must destroy the machine of the bourgeois State. Lenin forged the real historical answer to the problem bequeathed us by the Commune in the form of a centralized Party with ‘iron discipline’. He created the instrument – and although it is a political instrument, Lenin’s model is a military machine – that could bring about the ‘destruction’ Marx wanted, and that could replace the bourgeois State with a new kind of State exercising a popular despotism without historical precedent: the State of the dictatorship of the proletariat, which is in fact a State that merges with the insurrectional Party and which, to a large extent, militarizes the whole of society. The Stalinist terror was a post-insurrectional way of using a tool that was designed to ensure the victory of an insurrection: an internal political problem was handled as though it were a problem of the military type, and that implied the physical destruction of the enemy, or so-called enemy.

We can now describe the problem that Mao and the millions of militants who, between 1966 and 1976, acted in his name in China and the rest of the world tried to resolve. The Cultural Revolution was described by Mao as the final realization of the principles of the Paris Commune. What does that mean? For Mao, it meant that, even though the official position of the Chinese communists, who opposed Khrushchev and his successors, seemed to be saying the opposite, we have to conclude that, on the whole, the balance sheet of Stalin was negative. Why? Because, Mao tells us, Stalin was interested in the cadres and never the masses. As we know, Stalin held that ‘When the line has been established, cadres decide everything.’ According to Mao, ‘The people, and the people alone, are the active force in the making of world history . . . While we [communists] are often childish and ignorant.’15 We must therefore ensure as a matter of urgency that the political process that leads to communism -- and therefore the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat’ – rediscovers its sources and its basic actors in popular mass uprisings, as it did in

5 Ibid., p. 118. Translator’s note.
1927, and not in the Party apparatchiks. The forces available for this trial of strength were, first, educated youth (mobilized all over the world in the 1960s), the youngest and most politicized fraction of the workers, and some detachments of the Red Army. It was to these forces that Mao and those close to him turned from 1966 onwards. They plunged China into chaos for ten years, but launched ideas, slogans, organizational forms and theoretical schemas whose power has yet to be exhausted.

The failure of this extraordinary uprising, whose freedom – reflected in hundreds of new organizations, thousands of newspapers, giant posters, constant meetings and countless clashes – is still astonishing, was no more due to the nature of the problem it was trying to resolve than the failure of the Paris Commune was due to the fact that the workers rose up in rebellion, which was quite natural and necessary in the circumstances that were forced upon them. It was due to the fact that the movement could not dialectically interact at the national level with forms of organization that could have really modified the schema of the Party-State. As throughout the Paris Commune, the absence of any effective centralized leadership (a real Party) led to anarchic divisions and impotence. In China, a myriad of factions undermined a form of collective action. The most advanced form of local organization, which, significantly enough, adopted the name ‘the Shanghai Commune’ at the beginning of 1967, did not succeed in becoming a national paradigm and finally collapsed, leaving the field open to the Party’s revanchards.

Basically, the problem was very real (how to take the political process of communism beyond State action and into the life of the people). The attempt to do so taught us some universal lessons (there must be a direct alliance between intellectual youth and the workers; we have to experiment with non-party forms of organization; education must undergo a metamorphosis; the division of labour must be destroyed; power in the factories must be reorganized along democratic lines; new links must be established between town and countryside; we must create a new and popular intellectuality, and so on). The failure to do so means that we must abandon once and for all the militarized paradigm of the Party, and move towards what the Organisation politique in France calls a ‘politics without parties’. We have now reached that
point, and we have reached it because the Cultural Revolution brought us here.

We can therefore say without fear that, in the current phase of revolutionary politics, the Cultural Revolution plays the role that the Paris Commune played in its Leninist sequence. The Cultural Revolution is the Commune of the age of Communist Parties and Socialist States: a terrible failure that teaches us some essential lessons.

I will end by saying that the direct link you think you can establish between the Cultural Revolution and the furious capitalist accumulation that is now ravaging China is just window-dressing. One could just as easily say that the failure of the Paris Commune in France led directly, at the end of the nineteenth century, to a long period of imperialist expansion and unfettered political wheeling and dealing that finally led to the slaughter of 1914–18. Obvious, isn’t it? When a grandiose attempt to resolve a political problem of the day is made by revolutionaries and ends in failure, the enemy is going to be firmly in the saddle for quite a while! But Delescluze, Vallès, Louise Michel, Varlin and Blanqui were no more responsible for the colonialism and corruption of the belle époque than Mao and his comrades are responsible for the China of the billionaires in Shanghai or for globalized corruption. The true descendants of the Communards are Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg and all the other revolutionaries who overcame the aporiae of the Commune, but still took it as a starting point. And their descendants are trying to find their way and experiment with ways to deal with the problem bequeathed them by the Cultural Revolution: that of a political process ‘without a party’, but which still takes as its starting point the universal aspects of that attempt to resolve it. I think that we are both their descendants. Which is why a certain Yves-Charles Zarka, who writes for Le Figaro, is not mistaken when, in a hyperbolic eulogy, he identifies both of us as ‘philosophers of Terror’.

Yours in friendship, my dear Slavoj.

---