Introduction

The term “horizon” marks a division. Understood spatially, the horizon is the line dividing the visible, separating earth from sky. Understood temporally, the horizon converges with loss in a metaphor for privation and depletion. The “lost horizon” suggests abandoned projects, prior hopes that have now passed away. Astrophysics offers a thrilling, even uncanny, horizon: the “event horizon” surrounding a black hole. The event horizon is the boundary beyond which events cannot escape. Although “event horizon” denotes the curvature in space/time effected by a singularity, it’s not much different from the spatial horizon. Both evoke a fundamental division that we experience as impossible to reach, and that we can neither escape nor cross.

I use “horizon” not to recall a forgotten future but to designate a dimension of experience that we can never lose, even if, lost in a fog or focused on our feet,
we fail to see it. The horizon is Real in the sense of impossible—we can never reach it—and in the sense of actual (Jacques Lacan’s notion of the Real includes both these senses). The horizon shapes our setting. We can lose our bearings, but the horizon is a necessary dimension of our actuality. Whether the effect of a singularity or the meeting of earth and sky, the horizon is the fundamental division establishing where we are.

With respect to politics, the horizon that conditions our experience is communism. I get the term “communist horizon” from Bruno Bosteels. In The Actuality of Communism, Bosteels engages with the work of Álvaro García Linera. García Linera ran as Evo Morales’s vice presidential running mate in the Bolivian Movement for Socialism—Political Instrument for the Sovereignty of the Peoples (MAS-IPSP). He is the author of multiple pieces on Marxism, politics, and sociology, at least one of which was written while he served time in prison for promoting an armed uprising (before becoming vice president of Bolivia, he fought in the Tupac Katari Guerrilla Army). Bosteels quotes García Linera’s response to an interviewer’s questions about his party’s plans following their electoral victory: “The general
horizon of the era is communist.”¹ García Linera doesn’t explain the term. Rather, as Bosteels points out, García Linera invokes the communist horizon “as if it were the most natural thing in the world,” as if it were so obvious as to need neither explanation nor justification. He assumes the communist horizon as an irreducible feature of the political setting: “We enter the movement with our expecting and desiring eyes set upon the communist horizon.” For García Linera, *communism* conditions the actuality of politics.

Some on the Left dismiss the communist horizon as a lost horizon. For example, in a postmodern pluralist approach that appeals to many on the Left, the economists writing as J. K. Gibson-Graham reject communism, offering “post-capitalism” in its stead. They argue that descriptions of capitalism as a global system miss the rich diversity of practices, relations, and desires constituting yet exceeding the economy and so advocate “reading the economy for difference rather than dominance” (as if dominance neither

presupposes nor relies on difference). In their view, reading for difference opens up new possibilities for politics as it reveals previously unacknowledged loci of creative action within everyday economic activities.

Gibson-Graham do not present Marxism as a failed ideology or communism as the fossilized remainder of an historical experiment gone horribly wrong. On the contrary, they draw inspiration from Marx’s appreciation of the social character of labor. They engage Jean-Luc Nancy’s emphasis on communism as an idea that is the “index of a task of thought still and increasingly open.” They embrace the reclamation of the commons. And they are concerned with neoliberalism’s naturalization of the economy as a force exceeding the capacity of people to steer or transform it.

Yet at the same time, Gibson-Graham push away from communism to launch their vision of post-capitalism. Communism is that against which they construct their alternative conception of the economy. It’s a constitutive force, present as a shaping of the view they advocate. Even as Nancy’s evocation of

3 Ibid., 82.
communism serves as a horizon for their thinking, they explicitly jettison the term “communism,” which they position as the object of “widespread aversion” and which they associate with the “dangers of posing a positivity, a normative representation.” Rejecting the positive notion of “communism,” they opt for a term that suggests an empty relationality to the capitalist system they ostensibly deny, “post-capitalism.” For Gibson-Graham, the term “capitalist” is not a term of critique or opprobrium; it’s not part of a manifesto. The term is a cause of the political problems facing the contemporary Left. They argue that the discursive dominance of capitalism embeds the Left in paranoia, melancholia, and moralism.

Gibson-Graham’s view is a specific instance of a general assumption shared by leftists who embrace a generic post-capitalism but eschew a more militant anticapitalism. Instead of actively opposing capitalism, this tendency redirects anticapitalist energies into efforts to open up discussions and find ethical spaces for decision—and this in a world where one bond trader can bring down a bank in a matter of minutes.

I take the opposite position. The dominance of capitalism, the capitalist system, is material. Rather than
entrapping us in paranoid fantasy, an analysis that treats capitalism as a global system of appropriation, exploitation, and circulation that enriches the few as it dispossesses the many and that has to expend an enormous amount of energy in doing so can anger, incite, and galvanize. Historically, in theory and in practice, critical analysis of capitalist exploitation has been a powerful weapon in collective struggle. It persists as such today, in global acknowledgment of the excesses of neoliberal capitalism. As recently became clear in worldwide rioting, protest, and revolution, linking multiple sites of exploitation to narrow channels of privilege can replace melancholic fatalism with new assertions of will, desire, and collective strength. The problem of the Left hasn’t been our adherence to a Marxist critique of capitalism. It’s that we have lost sight of the communist horizon, a glimpse of which new political movements are starting to reveal.

Sometimes capitalists, conservatives, and liberal-democrats use a rhetoric that treats communism as a lost horizon. But usually they keep communism firmly within their sight. They see communism as a threat, twenty years after its ostensible demise. To them, communism is so threatening that they premise political
discussion on the repression of the communist alternative. In response to left critiques of democracy for its failure to protect the interests of poor and working-class people, conservatives and liberals alike scold that “everybody knows” and “history shows” that communism doesn’t work. Communism might be a nice ideal, they concede, but it always leads to violent, authoritarian excesses of power. They shift the discussion to communism, trying to establish the limits of reasonable debate. Their critique of communism establishes the political space and condition of democracy. Before the conversation even gets going, liberals, democrats, capitalists, and conservatives unite to block communism from consideration. It’s off the table.

Those who suspect that the inclusion of liberals and democrats in a set with capitalists and conservatives is illegitimate are probably democrats themselves. To determine whether they belong in the set of those who fear communism, they should consider whether they think any evocation of communism should come with qualifications, apologies, and condemnations of past excesses. If the answer is “yes,” then we have a clear indication that liberal democrats, and probably radical democrats as well, still consider communism
a threat that must be suppressed—and so they belong in a set with capitalists and conservatives. All are anxious about the forces that communist desire risks unleashing.

There are good reasons for liberals, democrats, capitalists, and conservatives to be anxious. Over the last decade a return to communism has re-energized the Left. Communism is again becoming a discourse and vocabulary for the expression of universal, egalitarian, and revolutionary ideals. In March 2009, the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities hosted a conference entitled “On the Idea of Communism.” Initially planned for about 200 people, the conference ultimately attracted over 1,200, requiring a spillover room to accommodate those who couldn’t fit in the primary auditorium. Since then, multiple conferences—in Paris, Berlin, and New York—and publications have followed, with contributions from such leading scholars as Alain Badiou, Étienne Balibar, Bruno Bosteels, Susan Buck-Morss, Costas Douzinas, Peter Hallward, Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, Jacques Rancière, Alberto Toscano, and Slavoj Žižek.

The conferences and publications consolidate discussions that have been going on for decades. For over
thirty years, Antonio Negri has sought to build a new approach to communism out of a Marxism reworked via Spinoza and the Italian political experiments of the 1970s. The *Empire* trilogy that Negri coauthored with Michael Hardt offers an affirmative, non-dialectical reconceptualization of labor, power, and the State, a new theory of communism from below. Alain Badiou has been occupied with communism for over forty years, from his philosophical and political engagement with Maoism, to his emphasis on the “communist invariants”—egalitarian justice, disciplinary terror, political volunteerism, and trust in the people—to his recent appeal to the communist Idea. Communism is not a new interest for Slavoj Žižek either. In early 2001 he put together a conference and subsequent volume rethinking Lenin. Where Negri and Badiou reject the Party and the State, Žižek retains a certain fidelity to Lenin. “The key ‘Leninist’ lesson today,” he writes, is that “politics without the organizational form of the Party is politics without politics.”4 In short, a vital area of radical philosophy considers communism a contemporary name for emancipatory, egalitarian politics and

has been actively rethinking many of the concepts that form part of the communist legacy.

These ongoing theoretical discussions overlap with the changing political sequences marked by 1968 and 1989. They also overlap with the spread of neoliberal capitalist domination, a domination accompanied by extremes in economic inequality, ethnic hatred, and police violence, as well as by widespread militancy, insurgency, occupation, and revolution. The current emphasis on communism thus exceeds the coincidence of academic conferences calling specifically for communism’s return with the new millennium’s debt crises, austerity measures, increased unemployment, and overall sacrifice of the achievements of the modern welfare state to the private interests of financial institutions deemed too big to fail. Already in an interview in 2002, prior to his election to the Bolivian presidency, Evo Morales had announced that “the neoliberal system was a failure, and now it’s the poor people’s turn.”

Communism is reemerging as a magnet of political energy because it is and has been the alternative to capitalism.

The communist horizon is not lost. It is Real. In this book, I explore some of the ways the communist horizon manifests itself to us today. As Bosteels argues, to invoke the communist horizon is to produce “a complete shift in perspective or a radical ideological turnabout, as a result of which capitalism no longer appears as the only game in town and we no longer have to be ashamed to set our expecting and desiring eyes here and now on a different organization of social relationships.”⁶ With communism as our horizon, the field of possibilities for revolutionary theory and practice starts to change shape. Barriers to action fall away. New potentials and challenges come to the fore. Anything is possible.

Instead of a politics thought primarily in terms of resistance, playful and momentary aesthetic disruptions, the immediate specificity of local projects, and struggles for hegemony within a capitalist parliamentary setting, the communist horizon impresses upon us the necessity to abolish capitalism and to create global practices and institutions of egalitarian cooperation. The shift in perspective the communist horizon
produces turns us away from the democratic milieu that has been the form of the loss of communism as a name for left aspiration and toward the reconfiguration of the components of political struggle—in other words, away from general inclusion, momentary calls for broad awareness, and lifestyle changes, and toward militant opposition, tight organizational forms (party, council, working group, cell), and the sovereignty of the people over the economy through which we produce and reproduce ourselves.

Some might object to my use of the second-person plural “we” and “us”—*what do you mean “we”*? This objection is symptomatic of the fragmentation that has pervaded the Left in Europe, the UK, and North America. Reducing invocations of “we” and “us” to sociological statements requiring a concrete, delineable, empirical referent, it erases the division necessary for politics as if interest and will were only and automatically attributes of a fixed social position. We-skepticism displaces the performative component of the second-person plural as it treats collectivity with suspicion and privileges a fantasy of individual singularity and autonomy. I write “we” hoping to enhance a partisan sense of collectivity. My break with
conventions of writing that reinforce individualism by admonishing attempts to think and speak as part of a larger collective subject is deliberate.

The boundaries to what can be thought as politics in certain segments of the post-structuralist and anarchist Left only benefit capital. Some activists and theorists think that micropolitical activities, whether practices of self-cultivation or individual consumer choices, are more important loci of action than large-scale organized movement—an assumption which adds to the difficulty of building new types of organizations because it makes thinking in terms of collectivity rarer, harder, and seemingly less “fresh.” Similarly, some activists and theorists treat aesthetic objects and creative works as displaying a political potentiality missing from classes, parties, and unions. This aesthetic focus disconnects politics from the organized struggle of working people, making politics into what spectators see. Artistic products, whether actual commodities or commodified experiences, thereby buttress capital as they circulate political affects while displacing political struggles from the streets to the galleries. Spectators can pay (or donate) to feel radical without having to get their hands dirty. The dominant class retains its position
and the contradiction between this class and the rest of us doesn’t make itself felt as such. The celebration of momentary actions and singular happenings—the playful disruption, the temporarily controversial film or novel—works the same way. Some on the anarchist and post-structuralist Left treat these flickers as the only proper instances of a contemporary left politics. A pointless action involving the momentary expenditure of enormous effort—the artistic equivalent of the 5k and 10k runs to fight cancer, that is to say, to increase awareness of cancer without actually doing much else—the singular happening disconnects task from goal. Any “sense” it makes, any meaning or relevance it has, is up to the spectator (perhaps with a bit of guidance from curators and theorists).

Occupation contrasts sharply with the singular happening. Even as specific occupations emerge from below rather than through a coordinated strategy, their common form—including its images, slogans, terms, and practices—links them together in a mass struggle.

The power of the return of communism stands or falls on its capacity to inspire large-scale organized collective struggle toward a goal. For over thirty years, the Left has eschewed such a goal, accepting instead
liberal notions that goals are strictly individual life-
style choices or social-democratic claims that history
already solved basic problems of distribution with the
compromise of regulated markets and welfare states—
a solution the Right rejected and capitalism destroyed.
The Left failed to defend a vision of a better world, an
egalitarian world of common production by and for the
collective people. Instead, it accommodated capital,
succumbing to the lures of individualism, consumer-
ism, competition, and privilege, and proceeding as if
there really were no alternative to states that rule in the
interests of markets.

Marx expressed the basic principle of the alterna-
tive over a hundred years ago: from each according to
ability, to each according to need. This principle con-
tains the urgency of the struggle for its own realization.
We don’t have to continue to live in the wake of left
failure, stuck in the repetitions of crises and specta-
cle. In light of the planetary climate disaster and the
ever-intensifying global class war as states redistrib-
ute wealth to the rich in the name of austerity, the
absence of a common goal is the absence of a future
(other than the ones imagined in post-apocalyptic sce-
narios like Mad Max). The premise of communism is
that collective determination of collective conditions is possible, if we want it.

To help incite this desire, to add to its reawakening force and presence, I treat “communism” as a tag for six features of our current setting:

1. A specific image of the Soviet Union and its collapse;
2. A present, increasingly powerful force;
3. The sovereignty of the people;
4. The common and the commons;
5. The egalitarian and universalist desire that cuts through the circuits and practices in which we are trapped;
6. The party.

The first two features can be loosely associated with the politics that configures itself via a history linked to the end of the Soviet Union as a state, as refracted through the dominance of the US as a state. What matters here is less the historical narrative than the expression of communism as the force of an absence. My discussion of these first two features highlights how the absence of communism shapes our contemporary setting.

In the sequence narrated as the triumph of capitalism
and liberal democracy, the communist horizon makes itself felt as a “signifying stress.” This is Eric L. Santner’s term for a way that reality expresses its non-identity with itself. As Santner explains, the “social formation in which we find ourselves immersed” is “fissured by lack” and “permeated by inconsistency and incompleteness.” The lack calls out to us. Inconsistency and incompleteness make themselves felt. “What is registered,” Santner explains, “are not so much forgotten deeds but forgotten failures to act.”

The frenetic activity of contemporary communicative capitalism deflects us away from these gaps. New entertainments, unshakeable burdens, and growing debt displace our attention toward the immediate and the coming-up-next as they attempt to drown out the forceful effects of the unrealized—the unrealized potentials of unions and collective struggle, the unrealized claims for equality distorted by a culture that celebrates the excesses of the very rich, the unrealized achievements of collective solidarity in redressing poverty and redistributing risks and rewards. The first two chapters thus

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treat the gaps, fissures, and lack Santner theorizes as signifying stresses in terms of a missing communism that makes itself felt in the setting configured by its alleged failure and defeat.

The second two features of the present that communism tags are positive (rather than present as the force of the unrealized or absent): the people in their common political and economic activity. In these chapters, I grapple with the question of class struggle today. If Hardt and Negri are right (and I think they are) to argue that "communication is the form of capitalist production in which capital has succeeded in submitting society entirely and globally to its regime" (I use the term "communicative capitalism" to bring out this amplified role of communication in production), what are the repercussions for understanding class struggle? Does it make sense to continue to emphasize the proletariat? I argue that it does not, not if by "proletariat" one has in mind an empirical social class. More useful is the idea of proletarianization as a process of exploitation, dispossession, and immiseration that produces the very rich as the privileged class that lives off the rest of us. I offer the notion of "the people as the rest of us," the people as a divided and divisive force, as an
alternative to some of the other names for the subject of communism—proletariat, multitude, part-of-no-part.

How the people divide or how the non-coincidence of the people is inflected and qualified is a matter of politics. Political organizations respond to this division, construing and directing it in one way rather than another. Accordingly, I end this book by taking up the question of the communist party. Although actively calling for the reclamation of communism as the name for a revolutionary universal egalitarianism, Badiou insists on a communism disconnected from the “outmoded” forms of Party and State. Hardt and Negri likewise reject Party and State: “Being communist means being against the State.” 8 They emphasize instead the constituent power of desire and the affective, creative productivity of the multitude as the communism underpinning and exceeding capitalism. This is not my view. I agree with Bosteels and Žižek that a politics without the organizational form of the party is a politics without politics.

Conceptualizing the party of communists in our

contemporary setting is and must be an ongoing project. As Bosteels argues, “party” does not name an instrument for carrying out the iron laws of history but “the flexible organization of a fidelity to events in the midst of unforeseeable circumstances.”¹⁹ I’m tempted to use terms from complexity theory here: the party is a complex, adaptive system. Its end is proletarian revolution, that is, the destruction of the capitalist system of exploitation and expropriation, of proletarianization, and the creation of a mode of production and distribution where the free development of each is compatible with the free development of all. We don’t yet know how we will structure our communist party—in part because we stopped thinking about it, giving way instead to the transience of issues, ease of one-click networked politics, and the illusion that our individual activities would immanently converge in a plurality of post-capitalist practices of creating and sharing. But we know that we need to find a mode of struggle that can scale, endure, and cultivate the collective desire for collectivity. And we know that we can learn from the past and are learning from ongoing experiments in

⁹ Bosteels, The Actuality of Communism, 243.
organization. I thus conclude by considering how occup-
pation is or is becoming such an organizational form, a
political form for the incompatibility between capital-
isim and the people.

The communist horizon appears closer than it has
in a long time. The illusion that capitalism works has
been shattered by all manner of economic and finan-
cial disaster—and we see it everywhere. The fantasy
that democracy exerts a force for economic justice has
dissolved as the US government funnels trillions of
dollars to banks and the European central banks rig
national governments and cut social programs in order
to keep themselves afloat. With our desiring eyes set
on the communist horizon, we can now get to work on
collectively shaping a world that we already make in
common.