

# COMMUNISM IS A NEW IDEA

Interview with Alain Badiou,  
by Jana Beránková

*I met with French philosopher Alain Badiou in Prague on April 13, 2018, on the occasion of the conference “Alain Badiou: Thinking the Infinite”, which focused on the position of mathematics in Badiou’s thought. The conference, organized by the Prague Axiomatic Circle, was held in the National Gallery in Prague on April 11th and 12th, 2018. We discussed the affirmative power of thought, communism, mathematics, and the forthcoming third volume of his magnum opus Being and Event, entitled The Immanence of Truths.*

At the conference “Alain Badiou: Thinking the Infinite,” you surprised us by criticising your own famous declaration “mathematics is ontology.” What did you mean by this self-criticism?

That conference was distinguished by an array of criticisms of the statement “mathematics is ontology,” and I therefore meditated upon what had been said and it seemed to me that many of these critical comments were justified, because the declaration “mathematics is ontology” is superficial. It’s a simple, superficial sentence which everyone can understand. As a result, I wanted to reconstruct the sense of this statement. And I therefore merely said, and in this sense it was a case of self-criticism, that this declaration was something of an advertisement, because philosophers are always accused of being excessively complex and incomprehensible. The declaration “mathematics is ontology” is highly comprehensible, but the price of this comprehensibility is its unacceptable simplification. In Prague I wanted to remind those in attendance at the

conference that philosophy always has to be precise, and if philosophy abdicates this precision, it becomes what Plato referred to as opinion (*doxa*). The statement “mathematics is ontology” is a statement which belongs to the sphere of opinions.

But that surely doesn't mean that mathematics would be unable to express anything that comes within the realm of ontology?

No, not at all, it means that mathematics, or more precisely certain branches of mathematics, could philosophically serve what we refer to as ontology. I've already remarked that mathematicians aren't interested in ontology, and so to say that “mathematics is ontology” is somewhat contentious, especially when mathematicians themselves don't even know what ontology is. In short, mathematicians are interested in other matters. It rather concerns a certain circuit: a philosopher outlines a certain idea, and then uses mathematics, wherein this idea can be verified, and in the end returns to philosophy. The sentence “mathematics is ontology” is not a precise description of this circuit.

So what is the relationship between philosophy and mathematics? In your work you use mathematical terminology, which originates for example in the theory of categories, large cardinals and set theory, but at the same time it's possible to find purely philosophical decisions in your thought. What role do these philosophical decisions, which we could refer to as philosophical axioms, play for you? Could you specify these axioms, which shape the formalism of your philosophical system?

It's complicated, because philosophy can't be written the same way as mathematics. The only philosopher who attempted to write philosophy like mathematics was Spinoza, who used axioms, definitions etc., but ultimately this led to him being forced to explain what he had in mind in the so-called *scholia*. These scholia were non-mathematical, explanatory texts. I can only outline my basic theoretical decisions. For example, I'm convinced that the form of being *qua* being is plurality. This statement can be called a philosophical axiom. However, it's necessary to remind ourselves that philosophy resembles mathematics in the sense that when you embark upon some kind of idea, then you can't derive it from something that preceded it, because this is a beginning. The eternal question remains: what was the first philosophical statement. In Plato this time-honoured question took on the form of the statement: “The only thing I know is that I know nothing.” But it doesn't work that simply, because at a certain moment it's necessary to distinguish precisely what I know, and to think what constitutes the beginning. And I can therefore say that the statement “being is plurality without one” is an initial statement which will then be vindicated by the actual results, just as usually takes place in mathematics.

What you're describing resembles Kurt Gödel's *incompleteness theorems*, which state that if we have a formal system, then this system always contains some kind of fundamental statement that cannot be demonstrated from within the system.

I'd say rather that the very construction of the system proves the statement. This means that this initial statement is a posteriori proven and vindicated thanks to the scope of its consequences. But we never have a demonstrative certainty which would resemble mathematical formalism. We have only the reader's conviction that if we begin with this statement and deduce precise consequences from it, then we'll come to a meaningful description of something and also arrive at the principles that orient our behaviour and thought. From this perspective it's evident that philosophy always contains unsubstantiated affirmations, which lead to consequences that motivate people to adopt one or another philosophy.

Your truth procedures, in which the subject always makes a definite decision, after which it is only the future that then confirms this initial decision, work on a similar principle.

Yes, definitely, I think that every truth functions on a similar principle. I use the word "truth" to refer to many different things. It might for example be a process of creating a work of art. When the artist begins to work on a new painting, this involves a process in which the beginning is entirely unclear. From the first strokes and sketches, everything takes shape gradually, but eventually the work reaches its final form, and it's precisely this work that then retrospectively vindicates the system of the artist's decisions. So I think that this concerns a general rule, that at the beginning there's always something like a decision, and this decision is often brought about by an event, something that has occurred, just as a great love poem is entirely clearly inspired by a romantic encounter.

This reminds us of the essential affirmative aspect of all thought. In other words, thought is not only deconstruction and criticism, but also an affirmation of something.

Precisely. I think that every true thought begins with affirmation. Of course, the result of this affirmation may be a whole range of criticisms. So for example, if I declare that being is pure plurality and from this I deduce the consequences, I immediately find myself in conflict with those who think that there is only one truth or that truth is an infinite divine unity. And I'll therefore have to criticise this stance. However, I believe that every criticism starts out from an affirmation and not vice versa. The idea that criticism proceeds affirmation could no doubt be called "philosophical ultraleftism." In politics this has led to the notion that destruction leads to construction. On the contrary, I believe that destruction leads only to destruction. However, certain constructions

require destruction, just as every philosophical affirmation requires criticism. I believe that negativity is always underpinned by affirmation in genuinely creative procedures, and not the other way round.

What you're describing is a certain internal dialectic of affirmative thought. And speaking of dialectics, I'd like to ask if you could say something about your own relationship towards Hegel's dialectics.

I think that all dialectics to a certain extent are an examination of the relationship between affirmation and negation. So it is ultimately based on recognition of the creative properties of negation. It's precisely this that places the dialectical position in opposition to the dogmatic position: the dogmatic position thinks that it's possible to go from affirmation to affirmation and avoid negation. I disagree. All those who believe that negativity has an essential function in thought are adherents of Hegel, as I am myself, but at the same time I'm convinced that in Hegel there's a kind of dogmatic faith in negation. Hegel believes that negativity itself is capable of constructing with the aid of consecutive overcomings and constructions, and thereby reaching the absolute by itself. On this point I disagree with Hegel, even if like him I retain the idea that we cannot do without negation. However, I don't believe that the essence of dialectics is negation, and I therefore reject, for example, Adorno's notion of negative dialectics. In fact, I proposed replacing this concept with the term "affirmative dialectics" in order to distance myself from him. And as regards my relationship to Hegel, you know, I think that there are only three great philosophers: Plato, Descartes, and Hegel, thus an ancient Greek, an early modern philosopher, and a philosopher of the modern age. I greatly admire Hegel, but I think that the actual relationship between affirmation and negation differs from the one put forth in Hegel's dialectics.

You mention Adorno, but it seems to me that you very rarely talk about the Frankfurt school...

I developed a critique of Adorno in my book on Wagner. There I tried to show that what Adorno sees in Wagner and what leads to him to believe that Wagner must be abandoned is a false vision, because Adorno's dialectic itself is false. The entire beginning of my book on Wagner is a critique of Adorno. It concerns a musical critique, but as we know Adorno attributed great importance to music and even considered himself a musician. And it's interesting that what Adorno advocated in the realm of music fell entirely within the realm of negative dialectics. Adorno's vision of music was that it's necessary to abandon the concept of form, that music should be *formless*, that it should be *in-formal* in the true sense of the word, that it should divest itself of form. I think that this is really a case of musical ultraleftism.

You are also rather a classicist, you usually give priority to form over formlessness.

Yes, because from a certain perspective all creative activity, whether it wishes to be or not, is a creation of form. In fact, even theorists of the formless (*l'informe*) give form to what lacks form. Even Adorno, if we look closely at his activity, merely desperately seeks a form which would express that which is without form. But the idea of the formless as such is an idea in which the will plays no role whatsoever. If you make a certain decision, this concerns form. No creative decision can be made without immediately becoming form. And for this reason I don't believe that it would be possible to create a theory of the formless as a real creative procedure.

In addition to this, in your book *Being and Event* you speak of the universality of truths, and in your as forthcoming book *The Immanence of Truths* you speak of the absolute nature of truths. This affirmation of the absolute and of universality is of opposing the cultural and linguistic relativism of ideological currents such as post-colonial studies. Why in your view is the universality or absolute nature of truths so important?

It's important because my conception of the whole of humanity is a figure of humanity's primordial unity. In the political arena too I believe that our ideal should not be bound to identities, as is the case with racism or nationalism. Historical experience shows that all politics defined on the basis of identity is conflict-ridden politics, in brief because it's impossible to define identity otherwise than through the aid of negation of the other. Identity is either one identity among many others, with which it must coexist, or it places emphasis on itself and can do so only through the negation of the other in this or that aspect. By contrast, the universalism involved in any true creative activity today serves the whole of humanity. I don't think it would make sense to speak of creation tied to a particular identity that would be acceptable elsewhere and represent a value for all. In other words, something can be valuable only if it is valuable to all, otherwise it is an identitarian value and as such is naturally suspect. For example, the history of jazz was originally linked to the demands of the black minority in the United States, and today we know that what was created therein has a universal value. Jazz expanded everywhere and became one of the great musical forms of the whole of humanity. The fact that its actual origin was identity-bound in no way prevents what remains of it from having a universal value. I think that even when dealing with post-colonial thought we can't do without this point, because if we take a closer look, the defence of the rights of minorities always takes place within the framework of a certain universalism. Nobody defends one or another identity merely in the name of this identity itself. We always defend it in order to demand for it the same rights as all others. This means that we demand the inclusion of our minority into humanity as such, without this identity thereby losing its own symbolism. On the contrary, its symbolism may enrich the whole

of humanity. A philosopher is always a defender of universality. After all, what sense would it make to speak of “Czech philosophy” or “French philosophy”? When we use the term “French philosophy,” in America or elsewhere, everybody is interested only in the universal aspects of this work.

*But at the same time this universality is located somewhere, and that location may be within a certain identity. This is just what you call the absolute...*

What I call the absolute is the solution to the fundamental problem that every universal creation has a local origin. I’m a materialist. What’s created is created somewhere with the aid of the resources of the environment in which it appears. For example, all great poetry is universal, despite the fact that it’s written in a specific language, which then leads to problems with translation. Understanding how something universal can be created in an individual situation, and understanding the relationship between universality and particularity, is in my view one of the greatest philosophical questions. In fact, even the ancient Greeks posed the question of whether what they had written in Greek could be of interest to the Egyptians, and whether what had been written by scholars could be of interest also to the illiterate. Plato’s dialogue *Meno* contains a famous scene in which it is shown that even a slave can understand a mathematical sentence. I’m convinced that in order for us to fully understand universal creation in a unique situation, it’s necessary for the work to have qualities that transcend both these aspects, which go beyond both manifest universality and creative uniqueness. It’s precisely this that I refer to, in accordance with philosophical tradition, as the absolute.

*Over the course of your life you’ve often defended migrants and undocumented workers, you’ve empathised with the situation of colonised countries and have criticised the colonial, or today rather the neo-colonial, situation of people from the so-called “Third World,” although this is a term I find somewhat problematic. You actively opposed the war in Algeria. Which is to say that in your political thought there’s always been an attempt to break out of the strictures of one or another particular cultural sphere...*

Yes, criticism of colonial wars, colonialism as such, and imperialism, all this is entirely necessary, as is criticism these days of the easy conscience of the capitalist and privileged West with regard to Africa and other countries. This attitude is intolerable, because it is a direct negation of universality. It suggests that its identity is superior to all others. Incidentally, Jules Ferry, who shaped modern French education, said that the mission of the superior races was to civilise the inferior ones, which was, after all, the colonial doctrine. Philosophy absolutely cannot tolerate such stances, philosophy must immediately take up a position which defends the rights of the whole of humanity, a position of the equality of identities. And the equality of identities means that an

identity as such must not be considered superior to another. It can only demand its recognition as an equal part of the whole of humanity.

Could you tell us more about your experience as an activist opposing the war in Algeria?

The opposition to the war in Algeria was my first political experience. It was the experience of my youth, and it immediately came up against unbelievable violence. It's necessary to keep in mind that during the war in Algeria torture was used in police stations in Paris; the war involved deporting immense groups of people, burning villages; illegal executions took place everywhere. We were in a situation which was distinguished by violence and injustice on a huge scale. It was a painful experience for me that during the initial years of this conflict the French public was on the side of the war. And I therefore understood two things: Firstly, that when something like that happens, it's absolutely essential to stand up against it, whatever the balance of power. And secondly, we must never underestimate the identitarian, dominating, and reactionary forces that are continually regaining the positions they have lost, continually crushing everything that stands against them. This dual experience was the foundation of my political life. If such flagrant injustice appears, it's necessary to rebel against it. But we shouldn't imagine that rebelling against something will be enough. We have to take up positions in a long-term battle, to give it form, methods of organisation, new aspects. This experience taught me two things: the necessity of revolt, or as Mao said "it's right to rebel," against the reactionaries, against injustices, and it's necessary to do so as soon as we understand that injustice is present, and not to wait until there are more of us, not to tell ourselves that it's a waste of time. No, it's necessary to rebel and at the same time to exercise great patience, because the enemy is always strong and overwhelming, and such a battle can't be over in five minutes.

We should also point out that when you speak of universality or universalism, this doesn't refer to state universalism but to a universalism which is internal to the subject, which follows from what you call a truth procedure...

Yes, universalism consists in creation, which is important for the destiny of the whole of humanity. For example, today we can still admire cave paintings created by people many thousands of years ago. This is a universalism of what humanity is capable of creating, by means of its own resources, for the whole of humanity. And the subject naturally experiences and feels this universalism when he or she is concerned with truth. So, for example, in the case of the war in Algeria, universalism was on the side of those who fought against the war, and by contrast on the side of the war there was no universalism, only the aggressive particularity of French imperialism. At every moment we must choose between an orientation which is in reality merely identity-bound and

conservative, and an orientation which is universal. This happens to us in numerous circumstances throughout the course of life, in which we encounter varying universal procedures.

In your work you mention four truth procedures: love, science, art, and politics. I'd now like to deal with one of these procedures and ask you the following question: Today many people say that within the sphere of art every new value is always quickly subordinated to the market. How in your opinion can an artist resist having his or her work overwhelmed by the finality of the market and financial value?

If I could provide a universal guide to contemporary artistic movements, I would have done so long ago. I think that every artist or creative figure today encounters a certain conservative resistance. This conservative resistance is different in every era. For example, in previous times religion prevented the emergence of certain artistic forms. In today's world, which is governed by capitalism, the chief force of resistance or subordination is the market. The church also previously employed artists, just as the market gives priority to or directly creates certain representations, while consigning other representations to oblivion. I don't think the problems of today's artists differ greatly from those of artists past. Each artist or group of artists defines the form of the creative intensity of art in a unique manner, with the goal of promoting some universal value. And the enemy today is not so much religious censorship (which naturally also exists), but rather the placing of art, in particular visual art, at the service of the market. This struggle has always existed for artists. Our enemy has merely changed its shape or form, but it has been with us since time immemorial.

I think that one problem of contemporary art is the predominance of a certain formalism. And here I don't have in mind mathematical formalism, but rather formalism in the negative sense of the word, in the sense of a creation of forms which are not linked to an idea. I think that capitalism today has the effect of depleting art, emptying it of meaning. Many artists today are incapable of speaking on a theoretical or intellectual level about their own work, because they have relinquished this activity to curators and other experts. It appears as if art has finally been stripped of any idea that could put up resistance, and as a result it can easily be appropriated by capitalism and the market.

Yes, but I think that this situation is new only to a certain extent, because the formalism you describe resides in a reduction of art to its decorative function. The battle between creative invention and the reduction of art to its decorative function has long existed. But what does this decorative art decorate? It always decorates the ruling class. And even today the formalism you mention, which is in the services of the market, merely decorates the ruling oligarchy, which alone has the resources to purchase such a dec-



orative system. If we take for example the academicism of the nineteenth century, this didn't concern formalist art so much as representative art, which ended up the same way as the majority of contemporary artistic production. All truth procedures are threatened with a similar fate. Genuinely universal truth procedures are in reality the enemy of all specific figures of power. And for this reason all systems of power, all ruling oligarchies, attempt to subdue truth procedures, and one form of this battle is always the endeavour to subordinate them to the ruling class. In art this takes place entirely openly, with the aid of financial corruption, art is pressured into becoming a mere decoration of the ruling class, or of the church, as I said. But in the case of other procedures also, exactly the same thing is taking place today. Today there's a dangerous controlling of science by the demands of technology, and these technological demands merely serve capital and profit. Science is threatened by its enslavement to the necessity of production. In politics also something similar is taking place. It's enough just to recall the remorseless everyday persecution of every emancipatory or collectivising politics by the ruling class. In fact even love today is an object of suspicion, because it doesn't fit into consumer society. Love has a universal power, because it can't be halted and constrained by identities. It's enough just to recall the asocial nature of the love of Romeo and Juliet in Shakespeare. And it's therefore possible to say that every hierarchical society to a certain degree attempts to subordinate truth procedures to itself, which in any case is possible only when these procedures cease to be truth procedures.

That's true. Here in Prague we need only look out the window at the Topičův dům building across the street from us, and we immediately recall all the critical remarks of Adolf Loos, who declared that ornament was a crime, and the polemical comments of the constructivists, all as if it were written down right here in the streets... But let's deal further with these artistic questions. In *The Immanence of Truths* you define the "work" (*oeuvre*). In your view the work (*oeuvre*) is something that by the nature of its own definition cannot be superimposed by finitude and constructible sets. This means that the *oeuvre* as such is always finite, but at the same time, thanks to its anchoring in the absolute or in various infinities, it cannot be reduced merely to finitude. You place the work in opposition to what you term "waste" (*déchet*). Could you explain to us precisely what this opposition of *oeuvre* and *déchet* means, as you describe in *The Immanence of Truths*?

The book offers several formal definitions of the opposition between these two terms, because "*déchet*" is something that is finite in a passive way, such that its functioning principle is to be the waste of the active infinite. So therefore any employee today is for example a waste product of global capitalism. And this isn't anything insulting, employees know that they themselves are waste, and as a result they also revolt from

time to time. The academic art of the nineteenth century is a waste product of the decorative ambitions of the ruling class of the nineteenth century, and so on. In this sense of the word, we could say that *déchet* is finite existence, which is a direct product of the hegemony of a certain infinite. By contrast, the *oeuvre* is something that eludes this suspicion, and which cannot be covered over by figures of the ruling finitude. The *oeuvre* eludes superimposition. And eluding superimposition means above all touching another infinite. Touching an infinite which is not an infinite of the structured hegemony. I therefore define the *oeuvre* as something finite. So for example, a painting is always finished, a musical composition has a beginning and an end, it is something completed, which nevertheless touches an infinity that differs from the infinity of the ruling system, it is the friction of two different infinities. And precisely this leads to the fact that the *oeuvre* can have universal capacities and is not merely a passive product of a certain identity-bound figure, but on the contrary eludes hegemony. And everything that eludes hegemony ultimately has a universal direction. The *oeuvre* is a manner in which humanity, within the framework of finitude, can touch an infinite that differs from the structural infinity of hegemony.

At the same time, these two concepts, which we could describe as form and the formless, assume a mutual dialectical relationship. I recall one of your lectures in New York, where you spoke about the fact that the artist always grasps something which comes within the realm of the formless and *déchet*, and transforms it into an *oeuvre*, giving consistency to something that was previously merely *non-form*, shapelessness.

Yes, definitely, this battle between form and the formless, the shifting of the boundaries between shape and shapelessness, is a general property of all creative endeavour. This can be seen very well in visual art, but it can also be observed in other areas. I could say that this battle between shape and shapelessness is something like a touch of the new infinite, which transcends the ruling infinite.

During the Prague conference you took a swipe at aesthetics, which you consider an academic monster. In opposition to this, you've written a book about so-called inaesthetics. What is inaesthetics?

Inaesthetics is merely an acknowledgement of the universal function of the artistic procedure, and it doesn't fall within the category of art criticism that would aim to influence the circulation of this or that work. Inaesthetics is a way to penetrate the artistic *oeuvre* and go right to its roots, in order for us to understand what makes it a truth procedure. Inaesthetics therefore inquires directly into the universality of the *oeuvre*; it involves a philosophical inquiry into what creates universality in the artistic sphere. So this is a philosophical approach, a kind of search for examples.

If we take architecture, for example, we've met here today to record this interview at the New Stage of the National Theatre, which is a superb building constructed by Karel Prager at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s. It's always seemed to me that this structure reflects the political situation in Czechoslovakia at the time it was built. It has baroque features, which attest to a period in which the state apparatus was distancing itself from the political movement. We refer to this period here as "normalisation." Could you respond to this location and say something about your impressions of it?

What surprises me here and strikes me as very beautiful is the endeavour made with this building to find a way out of the orthodoxies of its time. It eludes both the orthodoxy of Soviet monumentality and the orthodoxy of Western modernism. I'm very impressed by this, because it creates a novel temporal relationship between what is new and what is old, which appears to be somehow inscribed into the building itself. So, for exam-

Karel Prager

National Theater of the Czech Republic, New Stage (interior), 1977–1983

Photo Jana Beránková



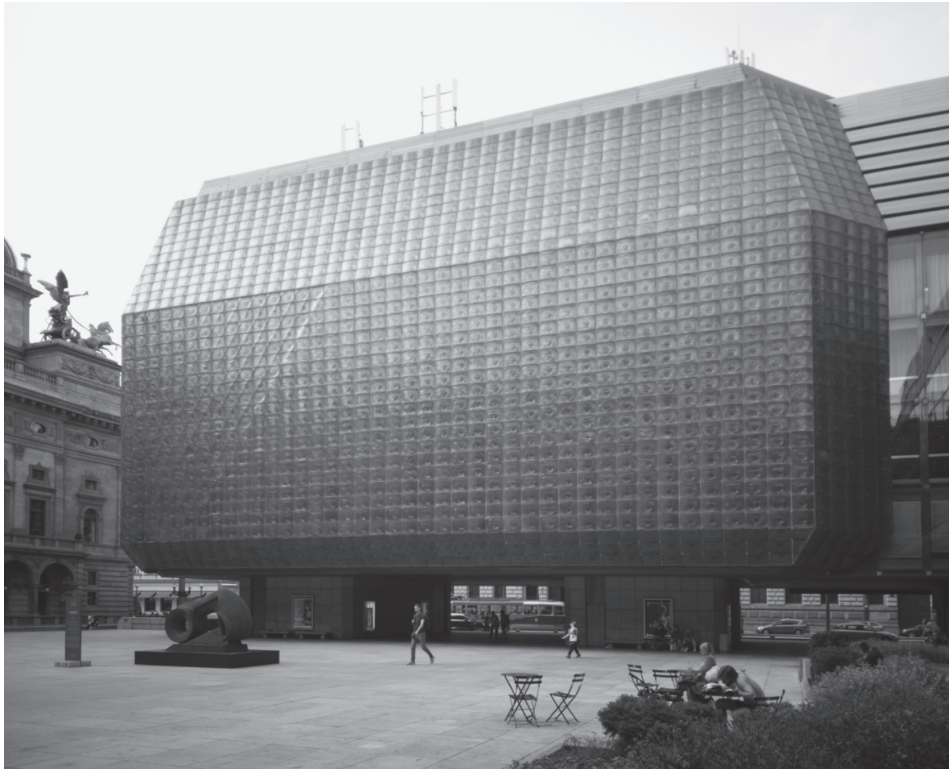
*Interview with Alain Badiou*

ple, the abundance of marble in Prager's architecture is very surprising, because it's not something that we find in the contemporary reign of concrete. Therefore the very materials here, wood or marble, are used in an entirely new way, and at the same time this building is distinguished by the complexity of its internal layout, which, as you say yourself, may give a somewhat baroque impression, and which is nevertheless brought into harmony with the functioning of the straight lines and large glazed walls, signs of ascendant modernity. This building has a synthetic character, and also the beauty of a certain vacillation. As if it were vacillating between a number of different styles, without descending into eclecticism. As if it were creating its own further allure out of this vacillation. And I'd say that this vacillation is in fact the uniqueness of the history of Czechoslovakia. It's enough to recall the Prague Spring and Dubček, also a time of political-historical vacillation. The New Stage of the National Theatre is a monument to this vacillation.

Karel Prager

National Theater of the Czech Republic, New Stage (exterior), 1977–1983

Photo Jana Beránková



Does this building not in fact contain something like an attempt to locate a socialist modernity?

Yes, it contains a modernity that is expansive and doesn't try to be a hard break with the past. It's not marked by the mere stylistics of formal destruction, but by something which retains various transformed elements of the past, and it reconfigures them. We could quite possibly name this building a palace of the new politics.

How was the Prague Spring viewed in its time by French students? Did you see these two struggles, the Prague struggle and the Parisian struggle, as pursuing the same goals, or taking different paths?

I think that there was a fundamental point of convergence between them. Today we don't remind ourselves often enough of the fact that May '68 was also a revolt against the French Communist Party. And the party too regarded it as such. Those who opposed the movement included not only the police and the state, which is understandable, but also the leadership of the main Communist unions. When we tried to reach the factories in order to speak with the workers, we were often directly physically prevented from doing so by interventions of the French Communist Party. The French Communist Party was an obedient pupil of Soviet power. The fact that a revolt, which after all was demanding communism and socialism, found one of its most important obstacles to be official communism, brought May 68 close to the situation of the Prague Spring. Whereas in Prague it all ended violently with the military intervention, it's necessary to recall that in France also the intervention of the union leadership and the disciplinary measures of the Communist Party were an obstacle to the emancipatory will of the people, such as our movement represented. In both cases it was about destroying the birth of a new socialism.

Except for the fact that in Czechoslovakia this rupture took place to a certain extent within the party, even if the people's movement naturally exceeded the expectations of the party members. The party as such was divided between the reformist wing, Dubček, etc., and the conservative wing, which was more oriented towards Moscow.

Yes, naturally, but at the same time there were reformists also in the French Communist Party. That division existed there too. However, the predominant and official stance of the Communist Party played a role similar to that played here by the conservative position that was oriented towards the Soviet Union. And so I think that both events are analogous. Each consisted in an attempt at political transformation located within the framework of communism and socialism, but which at the same time transgressed the boundaries of the official International. This point connected both events. And for this reason also we viewed the Prague movement as a movement which was on our

side. When we discussed Dubček's pronouncements, naturally we didn't agree with everything, but in general it can be said that this movement was on our side.

You promote what you call "the communist hypothesis," and therefore I'd now like to ask you Lenin's question: "What is to be done?"

I think that we find ourselves at a moment when it's necessary to rebuild everything. Sometimes it appears to me that our age is similar to the 1840s. It resembles Europe after Napoleon. We are experiencing a period of restoration. The entire world is now living under a regime that's restoring the supremacy of capitalism. Capitalism has now won even in the Soviet Union and China. We've returned to a situation in which the world powers are competing for hegemony, and in many regions there is war. We should rewrite the Communist Manifesto, rewrite and once again propose the idea that another possibility exists. And to do so we must construct our own evaluation of what has happened in the past. This is very important. We mustn't avoid criticism, we mustn't simply say that the past was good and become guardians of the past. This would get us nowhere, and furthermore it would be false. On the contrary, we must construct our own evaluation in Czechoslovakia, Russia or in France, in brief we must write down an actual evaluation that doesn't serve the governing order. All of these tasks today are mainly of an ideological and theoretical nature. However, political movements always begin with the creation of new ideological or theoretical concepts. This is important, because as Marx said, we take part in all struggles against the existing order.<sup>1</sup>

This means that we find ourselves in a time of rupture between the experience of so-called real communism and your hypothetical communism. The problem of Central Europe is that communism became an indigestible past, which creates a somewhat reactionary subjectivity. During your last lecture in Prague, which I organised together with my colleagues from the Prague Axiomatic Circle in 2014, you spoke about the need to affirm a certain communist modernity. You said that it was necessary to link modernity with communism rather than with capitalism, and to rid ourselves of what you called the "longing for the West." What did you mean then by the word "modernity?" Isn't this term ultimately too vague?

<sup>1</sup> Here Badiou is most likely referring to *The Communist Manifesto*, in which Marx wrote, "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole." Karl Marx, "Manifesto of the Communist Party," in Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 469-500, here 483. And later: "[...] the Communists everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of things." (*Ibid.*, p. 500.)



Yes, it's a vague term, but if someone says that a certain term is vague, then they themselves should propose a more precise term, otherwise it's even more vague than the original vague term. Many words today are naturally too general, and in fact even in 1847, when Marx wrote the Communist Manifesto, the Communist Party didn't yet exist and his work met with no reception. The fact that one experiment which attempted communism foundered within a mere seventy years of human experience doesn't mean that we shouldn't rebuild a communist hypothesis. And it's possible to define this communist hypothesis entirely precisely and robustly, there's nothing vague about it. We can demonstrate why a whole range of communist principles were never applied at all. The communist social order merely implemented the first principle of communism, which was the removal of the means of production and communication from the hegemony of private ownership. But this wasn't the full programme of communism. It was only its beginning. It was a condition rather than a goal. Communism also promoted other things, such as a fundamental transformation of the hierarchy of labour and sufficient education for the masses, so that the opposition between manual and intellectual labour would disappear. It required genuine internationalism and not a return of identities. Incidentally, the very idea of a "homeland of socialism," which was meant to be the Soviet Union, entirely contradicted what Marx said: that the proletariat has no country. And in addition to this, there was also Marx's notion that it's necessary to organise the abolition of the state. However, what happened was rather a reinforcement of state power and its police aspects. Today we know the principles of communism entirely precisely. We know which of them weren't applied or tested, and as a result experimentation with the principles of communism appears as something entirely modern. We have behind us only the first rough and primitive experiments, and first experiments are always somewhat primitive. For me modernity is an experimental and progressively expanding application of all the principles of communism, and not only their limitation to state ownership. This limitation is in itself contradictory, because according to communist logic the state should wither away. State ownership was not collective ownership. We can find experiences of genuine collective ownership in certain aspects of the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, or earlier, for example in some of the anarchist attempts in Catalonia during the Civil War.

So there are four principles: the abolition of private ownership, genuine internationalism, the abolition of the state...

And above all a new organisation of labour according to a non-hierarchical model. That's an absolutely fundamental point. That irreconcilable conflict between employees performing manual work on the one hand and engineers, managers or intellectuals on the other must be entirely transformed. This abolition of great inequalities may be the very most important aspect of communism. We mustn't forget that Marx considered

communism to be primarily a new organisation of labour, which was meant to create a new worker, which he referred to as the polyvalent worker.<sup>2</sup> This means that every division of labour, specifically its hierarchical division, should be abolished. This proposal was never applied or promoted in the experiments of so-called real socialism.

*These four principles must always be applied simultaneously, because today we know that capitalism is capable of accepting one of these principles, such as the polyvalent worker, but only in isolation from the other three principles.*

But I think that the notion that we have polyvalent workers here is merely a fiction. In this age I haven't seen the appearance of a polyvalent employee who would perform intellectual activity and receive a wage, and at the same time would dig ditches in the streets. On the contrary, today Asian or African workers are lured here only to be given the worst jobs for miserable wages. That's our real situation. What's termed a polyvalent worker today is a reference to the fact that an employee has to be prepared to change his or her job several times during the course of life. This means that the worker has merely to follow the vicissitudes of capitalism as such, and when a bookshop starts selling televisions instead of books, the employee has to adapt with immense mobility to the new product. This is a completely different thing, it's an intensification of labour flexibility on the part of employees. Let's not forget that one of the principles of communism was the abolition of the employment relationship. Employees shouldn't merely receive a wage from a private company. They should contribute to a common endeavour, for which they receive remuneration on the basis of the very nature of this labour. And for this reason it's necessary to say this: the communist revolution hasn't yet begun anywhere. Only the rudiments of socialism, the rudiments of a nationalised economy, have appeared. And these rudiments of a state-run economy have shown us that if we limit ourselves only to them, then in reality they will be subordinate to the capitalist economy. And therefore we have been defeated by the competition. Now I'll paraphrase Saint-Just, who said that happiness is a new idea in Europe. Communism is a new idea in the world.

<sup>2</sup> Marx does not actually seem to have used the term "the polyvalent worker" (in French *le travailleur polyvalent*). But Marx did develop in numerous texts the idea of the worker freed from the strictures of profession and specialization that are imposed by the division of labor.