

Maoism with pretensions

Mike Macnair reviews: Alain Badiou's 'The communist hypothesis' (translators D Macey, S Corcoran) London 2010, pp279, £12.99

Even with the self-deprecatory title 'Communist hypothesis', this book promises more than it delivers. Verso has published it in a format which is clearly designed to recall the Little red book - the pocket edition of quotations from Chairman Mao. This was a compulsory possession for Chinese citizens during the Cultural Revolution period, part of the uniform of western Maoists at the same period, and adopted as a fashion accessory by a good many western leftist youth of the late 60s and very early 70s more generally.

Badiou is a Maoist, but no Mao: unlike Mao's stylish (if misleading) aphorisms, he offers us Parisian leftacademic, philosophical obscurity, and an extreme use of stipulative definitions - giving strange Badiouvian meanings to 'truth' and 'truth procedure', 'event', 'state', 'fact', and so on.¹ He is a philosophy professor at the European Graduate School in Saas-Fee, Switzerland, previously at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, and (for most of his career) at the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes- Saint Denis), whose philosophy department was dominated by leftists.

The book is a collection of essays and lectures: on May 1968 - one written in late 1968 and one for its 40th anniversary in 2008; on the outbreak of the financial crisis in 2008 (classed as relating to May 68); on the Chinese Cultural Revolution (from 2002); on the Paris Commune (from 2003); and 'The idea of communism', a paper given to a (large) conference at Birkbeck College, London, with that title in March 2009. The book closes with a letter from Badiou to Slavoj Žižek, defending Mao (the French edition is said to include Žižek's reply, but this is not in the translation).

The idea of Maoism as representing an unsullied international revolutionary centre died while Mao was still alive, when the People's Republic of China adopted a policy of cooperation with the Pinochet regime in Chile after the 1973 coup, and supported South African intervention in the civil war in Angola. In reality, the Chinese leadership had already decided on a Realpolitik geopolitical realignment with the US in response to Sino-Soviet border clashes in 1969. This decisionmaking process ended with the death of Lin Biao in September 1971 and the large-scale purge which followed. But this was not transparent until 1973-75. Even then, reality did not catch up with most western Maoists until after the fall of the 'Gang of Four' and rehabilitation of Deng Xiaoping in 1976, and the marketising policy which began to emerge under the new leadership.

From then on western Maoism tended towards political collapse in a variety of directions - social democratic, left 'official communist', anarchist, and so on. (I disregard those former very numerous former Maoists who went over to the right, like former leftists of all varieties.) Badiou's variant is to hang on to the idea of the Cultural Revolution and May 68 as conceived broadly in Bakuninist terms, while advocating a 'non-party' form of political organisation to give support to everyday struggles.

At various points in the book he cites positively the Organisation Politique, which in 1985 replaced the Union des Communistes de France Marxiste-Léniniste (UCF-ML), which Badiou had participated in founding in 1969. The OP was heavily involved in defence of the sans-papiers (in English official language 'illegal immigrants'); it wound up in 2007, apparently broken up by a sharp debate in the French bourgeois media in 2006-07 over Badiou's alleged anti-Semitism.² It turns out that 'supporting struggles' does not succeed in evading the problem of differences over high politics.

Badiou's 'communist hypothesis' when closely examined turns out to reduce "the need to cling to the historical hypothesis of a world that has been freed from the law of profit and private interest" (p63) - or, as the global 'social forums' movement animated by the Brazilian Workers Party in the late 1990s-early 2000s put it, 'Another world is possible'. But Badiou in fact offers us no reasons to believe this hypothesis. It is, rather, an act of faith authorised by the persistence of human aspirations to emancipation: as Lewis Ayres in his *Legacy of Nicaea* (Oxford 2004) justifies taking Nicene Trinitarianism seriously by its persistence "in spite of Hegel, fire and sword" (chapter 16), and with as little plausibility.

The 'communist hypothesis' is, moreover, quite clearly not the point of the book. The running themes are twosided. First, the eruption of 'events' (in the very limited Badiouian sense) like the Paris Commune, the Cultural Revolution and May 68, creates new possibilities, and poses 'points' (the sense is again Badiouian) at which there is a sharp choice between options, and defeat results from making the wrong choice. The history of failure of workers' rebellions and therefore of communism (pp1-40) will end when the participants finally make the right choice and win.

Second, the underlying persistent problem is the existence of workers' and leftist parties. In the first place, these parties organise reconciliation with the "capitalo-parliamentarist" 'state' (in quotes because the sense is again Badiouian: "the set of constraints which limit the possibility of possibilities", p243). This is illustrated from May 68 and after (pp43-71) and from the history around the Paris Commune (pp168-228).

Secondly, if victorious they produce the 'party-state' (ie, Stalinism).³ This is illustrated primarily from the Cultural Revolution (pp101-56). Badiou regards this not as an unusual form of Stalinist bureaucratic purge (the Trotskyist Peng Shu-Tse's view at the time, which has become generally accepted), but as a real attempt to overcome tendencies towards capitalism which failed because there was no break with the party-state idea. But Badiou also sees the problem as originating in Marx's ambiguous response to the Paris Commune - on the one hand anti-statist; on the other critical of the Communards as failing to produce an effective state (pp178-86).

The 'new' politics Badiou proposes as an alternative is expressed in various ways; among them a "combination of complex ideological and historical work, and theoretical and practical data about new forms of political organisation", or "the era of reformulation of the communist hypothesis" (p66; original emphasis); "a practical alliance with those people who are in the best position to invent it in the immediate: the new proletarians who have come from Africa and elsewhere, and the intellectuals who are the heirs [such modesty! - MM] to the political battles of recent decades" (p99); or "a radical rupture with capitalo-parliamentarism, a politics invented at the grassroots level of the popular real, and the sovereignty of the idea" (p100).

Disregarding the neo-Platonist philosophical machinery (pp229-30), this is not a new politics at all. The case was in fact better argued without the Maoist impedimenta by John Holloway's 2002 *Change the world without taking power*. It is, in reality, merely the anti-parliamentarist political abstentionism of the 1960s-70s 'New Left', deprived of the 'wildcat strike' phenomenon which gave that politics its temporary plausibility. Behind this in turn lie the ideas of the 'left' and 'council' communists of the 1920s. Behind those are Georges Sorel and the pre-World War I syndicalists. And behind them is Bakunin's original critique of Marx and the 'Marxists', and their argument for working class political action.

Badiou makes a token denunciation of anarchism "which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or the shadow, of the communist parties" (p155), but this is completely without substance: what exactly in the substance of Badiou's arguments is not already in Bakunin's Statism and anarchy?

Not a new politics then, but an old and ineffectual one. However, it is worth discussing briefly why this politics is in the last analysis ineffective.

The basic problem is simple. We ('we the people'; a fortiori 'we the working class') cannot be permanently on strike, on the streets, or occupying government offices. The reason is that if we were not, no one would be producing food and other material goods which we need to survive. So the revolutionary 'event', in the sense of a very intense period of mass political mobilisation, cannot but come to an end.

Equally, what lay behind the 'rightist turn' in China to which Mao responded by promoting the Cultural Revolution was the catastrophic failure of the Great Leap Forward. Badiou in his letter to *Leik* defends Mao and his co-thinkers on this front, on the basis that Soviet policy forced economic autarky on China (pp265-66). But this does not in the least alter the fact that in the Great Leap Forward the Chinese leadership, borrowing from the 'dialectical' voluntarism of the first five-year plan, promoted wholly unrealistic material projects.⁴

The “set of constraints which limit the possibility of possibilities” is, then, not only the state in the sense of the political regime, but also material constraints.

Human emancipation does involve some emancipation from these constraints, in the sense that technical development enlarges the productivity of labour and our material powers, and by doing so makes communism possible after a very long period (since the end of the global ascendancy of hunter-gatherer society) in which it was impossible. But in this technical development “freedom is the recognition of necessity” in a narrower sense than Hegel’s tag borrowed by Engels.⁵ By recognising and grasping the (partial) lawfulness of the material world, we are enabled to manipulate it to human ends with increasing power. We achieve a wider range of possibilities, but only by an increased recognition of limits: we do not attempt to build road-bridges out of papier-mâché, etc. Equally, we do not promote Lysenkoism or the backyard steel plants, etc. of the Great Leap Forward.

To accept the material constraints and return to the political problem is to accept that we must not fetishise the revolutionary ‘event’, the strike or other form of direct action, at the expense of slower and more routine forms of politics. Going along with that, it means that we have to address the problem of permanent decisionmaking institutions, which will involve some organised division of labour.

This last does not mean a permanent specialisation of function: that is, that some people are always decisionmakers and others always subordinate. We can, and must, construct institutional forms which involve the subordination of the decision-makers to those below - eg, through freedom of communication and of information; and which tend towards rotation of the decision-making function - eg, through short-term limits for public and managerial office.

But, once we take this approach to the political problem, there is no reason to adopt the line of argument which explains Stalinism by Marx’s ambiguity on state power, or the fact that workers’ political parties have become agencies of the capitalist class by the nature of political parties as such. The exact reverse is the case. The anarchist, ‘left communist’, ‘New Left’, Badiouian line fails to address the problem of the design of political decision-making institutions. By doing so it will never persuade the broad masses to live without such institutions, but only create the ‘tyranny of structurelessness’ in its own attempts to organise - or end up as a tail of some other political force.

To address the design of political institutions, we need precisely a political party which engages not merely in denunciation of the effects of “capitalo-parliamentarism”, but in taking apart the institutional ways in which “capitalo-parliamentarism” works and arguing for an alternative to them. (And, for that matter, the Stalinist organisational conceptions of the trade union, party and small left group full-timers.) Such an organisation is a political party precisely because it poses the question of an alternative political order. If it poses this question, it is an attempt to create a party whether or not it calls itself such. If it does not - as is true of most of the far left Europe-wide - it is merely a pressure-group, whether or not it calls itself a party.

Badiou, of course, sets his book aside from such criticisms by claiming it is “a book of philosophy” and “does not deal directly with politics” (p37). To achieve this result he adopts a remarkably restrictive definition of ‘political text’: “A political text is something internal to an organised political process. It expresses its thought, deploys its forces and announces its initiatives” (p38). But this is yet another way in which The communist hypothesis must disappoint its readers: in spite of its episodic philosophical coloration, it is, in fact, a (self-deceiving) book about politics.

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Notes

1. Since for most of these stipulative definitions we have to wait until the latter part of the book, towards the end of the essay on the Paris Commune and in ‘The idea of communism’, the obscurity is increased. Since any argument for the peculiar stipulations is to be found in Badiou’s Being and event and Logics of worlds (to which he cross-cites), a philosophical engagement with the peculiar forms of The communist hypothesis argument would be pointless.

2. Badiou's original essay which attracted this debate and his response to part of it are at www.lacan.com/badword.htm. As translated there, the text, in spite of philosophical excess in expression, makes the perfectly sensible points that: (1) the holocaust does not morally license Zionist colonialism; (2) Zionist colonialism does not license the use by Islamists of the themes and tropes of classical anti-Semitism; and (3) identity politics is in general poisonous.

3. Badiou says that personality cults are a necessary element of the idea of communism (pp249-52) and condemns Khrushchev's criticism of the 'cult of the personality' of Stalin, saying that "under the pretence of democracy, it heralded the decline of the idea of communism" (p251); so his attitude to Stalinism is pretty contradictory.

4. Cf D Priestland *Stalinism and the politics of mobilisation* (Oxford 2007), especially the conclusion.

5. Discussion (among many other places) at www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/txt/Maoist, but no stylish aphorisms [davie07.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/txt/davie07.htm).