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HELLAS, MULTIPLIED BY COMMUNISM

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HELLAS, MULTIPLIED BY COMMUNISM²

The rebirth of communism, as shown by a new wave of publications (A. Badiou, B. Groys, S. Žižek), disqualifies the historical peculiarity of the Soviet experience in favor of the eternal “idea of communism”, originating in the works of the Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato. It is an ironic reversal of the fates suffered by the studies of Antiquity after the Russian Revolution. Apparently, the present day supra-historical idealism and the old school historical materialism exclude each other. On the other hand, an analysis of Soviet cultural politics from the 1920-30s may demonstrate that those radical theoretical stances were presented as distinct practical phases in the same changing experience of communism. A repudiation of the Soviet past brings for the current rebirth of communism nothing other than the hiding of ugly practical problems behind theoretical purity.

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Not more than ten years had gone by after the dissolution of the Soviet Union when it looked like communism suffered its final historical strike. Yet already in the early 2000s the new world order of triumphant capitalism was called “old news” and the post-communism era was sarcastically branded “the shortest ever in world history”. Suddenly, the economic crisis of 2008 enriched the editors of Marx’s “Capital”. Two impromptu conferences under the slogan “The Idea of Communism” then gathered full houses both in London and New York, signaling that the communist doctrine was once again able to capture the imagination of the masses.

Those who were born in the USSR would hardly recognize the new cast of communism. The title of my paper implies a connection with an epoch rather distant from our time – the Antiquity. Curiously enough, the newly reborn communist theory relates much more comfortably with the distant past than with the quite recent Soviet legacy. Let us begin with two examples.

On the back cover of Alain Badiou’s book, *The Communist Hypothesis*, there are the following words of his fellow communist, Slavoy Žižek: “Now, more than ever, one should insist on what Badiou calls the “eternal” idea of Communism.”³ Then if one looks in the key section of the book itself, the first reference introduced by the author is to the Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato.⁴ According to Badiou, the idea of communism is the idea of ideas, interpreted from its original context as the idea of the Good from the central passages of Plato’s *Republic*.

Today the association of the two ideas, of communism and of the Good, is a common place rather than an exception. The most closely related to us in time is coupled here with the most remote, the Present is coupled with the Antiquity. This unlikely match is destined to succeed at the cost of the intermediary, the History. Badiou includes a historical element, along with a political and a subjective one, among the preconditions for the idea of communism to function. Yet the mention of history in this triad is a burdensome inevitability. Badiou ought to keep in mind everything which went on with communism in the 20th century. However, for him a fresh start is the most important.⁵ For that to succeed today, history must be rid of the paramount significance it enjoyed within the communist theory of the past. Historical events are simply temporal localizations of true politics. History does not have a master plan, but that is not all.

³ Badiou A. 2010. *The Communist Hypothesis*. Verso Books.

⁴ Ibid. P. 229.

⁵ Žižek S. 2010. “How to Begin From the Beginning” in: Douzinas C., Žižek S. (eds). 2010. *The Idea of Communism*. Verso Books. P. 209-226.

Badiou insists that history does not exist at all as something real; there is only the communist idea which has a supra-historical status.⁶

Such theoretical attempts to depose history of the benefit of eternity pursue two practical goals. Firstly, it is a late response to “the end of history” doctrine that spread over the entire world after the breakup of the Soviet block. As with any reaction, the hypothesis of Badiou carefully preserves some traits of what it has rejected, i.e. the confidence that history has come to an end, since it does not play a significant part in his theory anymore. Secondly, the larger history has to be sacrificed because of a more local one, but is poisoned with the negative and ill-fated connotations of the Soviet experience. Contemporary communism theorists might have chosen to cross out only this period of time, yet instead they neutralize the whole historical dimension.

This is characteristic of the theorists who were existentially remote from the Soviet Union and do not feel uncomfortable forgetting it entirely. On the other hand, Boris Groys wrote his *Communist PostScript* with an intention to pay his dues to the Soviet experience. Judging from the title, it was the connection with the recent history that should have taken a prominent place in his argument. Yet Groys tends to give interpretations, rather than commentary, not to speak of the meticulous description of the past. Moreover, it is important to notice once again the same leading reference to the Ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, in Groys’ tribute to the legacy of 20th century Russian communism. According to Groys: “The Communism of Stalin’s sort makes true Plato’s dream of the philosophical rule, implemented solely through the language”.⁷

Though there are some grounds for this interpretation (for the sake of comparison, it is worth mentioning here the fateful political part, reserved for Plato’s theory of truth in inventing the science of state administration, that finally led to the birth of totalitarianism, according to Hannah Arendt)⁸, but at the same time it is amazing how much Groys’ thesis diverges from the views on the relations of the Antiquity to communism, which were dominant in the Soviet Union in Stalin’s time. This divergence is mutual: some orthodox Soviet scholars of Antiquity would treat the contemporary communist theorists as typical bourgeois “modernizers” of the historical reality.

Moreover, Hermann Diels, the famous classical scholar and editor of *The Fragments of the Presocratics*, was honored with such a negative appraisal. The preface to the Russian translation

⁶ Badiou A. 2010. *The Communist Hypothesis*. Verso Books. P. 241.

⁷ Groys B. 2007. *Kommunisticheskoy Postscriptum (Communist PostScript)*. Ad Marginem. P. 68 (In Russian).

⁸ Arendt H. 1990. “Philosophy and Politics” in: *Social Research*, 57, #1

(1934) of Diels' German book, *Antike Technik* (1920), was written by Sergej Ivanovitch Kovalev, whom his pupils remembered as "one of the most prominent creators of the new Soviet historical science, one of the main creators ... of Marxist interpretation of Ancient history".⁹ Kovalev had a great deal of respect for the German philologist, but this did not stop him from blaming Diels for the typical vice of any bourgeois scientist: the "modernization of Antiquity".¹⁰

Even today, in the midst of a scholarly dispute in Russia, one may hear the same accusation of the modernization of the past, albeit its original meaning has been gradually washed away. Speaking at least about domestic scholarship, Lenin's "On the State" lecture, delivered in Sverdlov University in 1919 is an obvious textual source of the accusation. The lecture was published ten years later in 1929.¹¹ It was this publication that was considered the blueprint for action by many generations of Soviet historians to come. Lenin briefed his audience on the Marx's theory of history as a monotonous succession of the social structures. The doctrine set for the whole of Antiquity a fixed place of an already overthrown social formation. Within the logic of historical materialism, transitions from one social formation to another correlate with the dialectical law of the transformation of quantity into quality, which does not happen gradually and evolutionarily, but revolutionarily and in a single leap.

The next decisive step in the formation of official politics in the studies of Antiquity was Stalin's address to the First Congress of *Kolkhoz* members (1933). There the communist leader mentioned that: "A revolution of slaves liquidated the slave-owning class and destroyed the slaveholding system of exploitation of the workers".¹²

Stalin's statement was a pure logical deduction from the doctrine of the revolutionary transition of the social formations. However, this did not make this statement valid historical science, because it simply did not rely on any hard evidence. Kovalev was among the first historians to respond to the all-important and longstanding "government order", issued by the Soviet government to the Soviet scholarship of Antiquity. In his book *Hellenism. Rome* (1936), he tried to corroborate the official stance on the existence of a notorious "slave revolution", which allegedly finished the whole Antiquity as a social formation with one stroke. Still today no hard evidence has been found confirming Stalin's thesis. Nevertheless, long years of historical

⁹ Frolov E. 1986. "S. I. Kovalev and his 'Istoria Rima (History of Rome)'" in: Kovalev S. 1986. *Istoria Rima (History of Rome)*. Leningrad University Press. (In Russian).

¹⁰ Diels H. 1934. *Antichnaja Tekhnika (Ancient Technique)*. Moscow. P. 9 (In Russian).

¹¹ For the crucial role of this publication in the fates of Soviet studies of ancient history, see in: Frolov E. 1999. *Russkaja nauka ob antichnosti (Russian Ancient Greek and Roman Scholarship)*. Sankt-Petersburg. (In Russian).

¹² Stalin I. 1934. *Voprosy Leninizma (Concerning Questions of Leninism)*. 10th edition. Moscow. P. 527 (In Russian).

research were wasted and many promising academic careers broken. Back then the ideological order helped communist leaders make some political sense out of studies of the remote past. They stimulated academic consolidation in the field which was plagued after the devastation of the pre-revolutionary historical school, and as a result the leading Soviet journal *Vestnik Drevnej Istorii* (Journal of Ancient History) was founded in 1937.

Since the transition from Antiquity to Medieval times was caused by a new stage in the ongoing class warfare, this historical change was predestined and irreversible, as well as the successive transitions to the capitalist formation and finally to the socialist society. Measured by this theory, the Antiquity was behind the present times not simply by millennia, but by several qualitative leaps in the historical process. Hence, any similarities it might have with the present must be utterly superficial. Maintaining the opposite meant contradicting the entire logic of historical materialism. This was what Kovalev criticized as “modernism” and “modernization”:

“Modernism, as the term itself shows, converts the Antiquity into something modern... modernization makes the work of a historian easier, since he or she follows the course of the least resistance: instead of revealing the originality of the relations in the Antiquity, the historian identifies them with some modern relations [which are] well-known to him/her, and then simplifies and lightens the job... Modernization of the Antiquity as a method of class warfare aims (consciously or unconsciously) at the maximum convergence between antique and capitalist relations, and to use this approximation for the struggle against the revolutionary movement of the proletariat”.¹³

Judging from this criterion, contemporary communism theorists unconsciously participate in class warfare, and not on the side of the proletariat. Yet, Kovalev shows some lenience toward such a prominent scholar as Hermann Diels, differentiating between “delicate” and “vulgar” types of modernism:

“[Diels’ method] is a very delicate modernism, but still a modernism ... for us, [the Marxists,] ... there is much more than mere continuity in history; ruptures of the continuity, leaps, emergence of the new qualities. For modernists there is only continuity, that becomes in its logical development the vulgar and traditional cliché: “So it was, so it will be”... Again, ... [Diels] shows no vulgar modernism. Diels would never humiliate himself with some crude distortion of the Antiquity ...”¹⁴

¹³ Diels H. 1934. *Antichnaja Tekhnika* (Ancient Technique). Moscow. P. 10-11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* P. 11.

Hence, when Slavoy Žižek insisted on the existence of the eternal idea of communism preserving itself and ever returning in history,¹⁵ then, from the standpoint of the early Soviet scholarship of Antiquity,¹⁶ he vulgarly modernized history and asserted some bourgeois triviality. Curiously, Žižek cites Lenin, who in 1922, justifying the New Economic Policy,¹⁷ also argued that the uphill way to communism presupposed the retreat to the starting point at the bottom of the mountain. It is, however, unlikely that what Lenin had in mind were the Platonic roots of the eternal communist idea. Lenin's calendar counted time from the October Revolution of 1917. His starting point was only a couple of years behind, and not millennia or even an eternity away.

Already in his prerevolutionary writings, Lenin depicted Plato as the antihero, by discerning two competitive lines of heritage in the history of philosophy – the idealistic one, originating from Plato, and the materialistic one, originating from Democritus. Notwithstanding all the initial enthusiasm expressed by some adepts of the new rule who ventured upon a reconciliation of Plato's *Republic* with the experiences of Soviet communism, in the final analysis it was impossible to consider Plato a valuable source on communism under those conditions. Compared to other prominent historical sources of these ideas, Plato's position was by far the worst, because Lenin's particularly harsh verdict on him was amplified by the general logic of historical materialism which dismissed Antiquity altogether.

To sum up the remarkable divergence between the contemporary communism theorists and the Soviet practices, it is worth mentioning two more features. The first feature is again determined by the stance on a premise of the doctrine of historical materialism, which holds that a change of social formations follows from a change in the mode of production, i.e. it is caused by some economic development. Paradoxically, aside from the routine criticism of neoliberal economic policies, the contemporary communism theory pays much less attention, if any, to the economic dimension of the idea of communism. Even the ideal for today's communism is not the implementation of the classical Marxist slogan, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need", but some sort of political equality. One may get even the impression that the surge of interest in Marx's *Capital* with the economic crisis in the background and the renewal of interest in the communist theory are two contemporary but essentially different processes.

¹⁵ Ibid. P. 217.

¹⁶ Frolov E. 1999. *Russkaja nauka ob antichnosti* (Russian Ancient Greek and Roman Scholarship). Sankt-Petersburg. (In Russian): "To sum up those changes, one may safely state, that by 1940s Russian ancient scholarship almost completely lost the distinction of an independent humane science, having turned into a testing area for Marxist politico-economical exercises".

¹⁷ Lenin V. 1970. "Zametki publizista (Notes of a Publicist)" in: *Polnoe sobranie sochinenij* (Complete Works). T. 44. Moscow. P. 414. (In Russian).

The second feature is the diminished significance of the “communist way of life” in comparison with the rediscovery of the eternal idea of communism itself. The very typology of references to Plato’s *Republic* testifies to this. The 6th book of *Republic* gets the largest share with the famous “metaphysical” passage on the idea of the Good, but not the 5th book with the descriptions of the extraordinary way of life for warriors, which was previously considered the *locus classicus* on the Platonic origins of communism.

Beyond all differences there are some similarities. In both cases the relation to Antiquity is dictated by the theoretical position, be it historical materialism or the “communist hypothesis”. If we pay attention to the changes in the Soviet internal policy from the 1920s to 1930s, a more complex picture emerges. In the final part of his “On the State” lecture, Lenin predicted the demise of the state, defined in this text as an apparatus of violence which is exploited by the dominant classes. Badiou also sets off his communist politics against the state. Yet, in both these cases it is a matter of theory. However, in practice, i.e. in Stalin’s interpretation of Lenin’s legacy, the question of the abolition of the state was postponed until the indefinite future. What happened is now well-known. The revolutionary thrust was slowed down. Trotsky, the theorist of the “perpetual revolution”, was expelled from the USSR. There began a conservation of the achievements of the new regime. A crucial political choice was made to establish socialism in one separate country instead of establishing communism on a global scale. There was a need for the display and presentation of political success in an obvious visual aesthetic and institutional form. According to Vladimir Paperny, the culture “two” gained the upper hand in the early 1930s, which is characterized by centralization and “crystallization”: “The regime was interested in the architecture, both as a practical tool to ground the population and as a spatial expression of the new centripetal value system. The architecture became symmetrical”.¹⁸

Interestingly Žižek depicts the same shift in his book, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, intended as an intellectual provocation. According to him, Stalin was a great humanist, demonstrating this in the changes Soviet cultural politics underwent in those years. Under the banner of “humanism”, Žižek understands the normalization of life and its return to normal from the revolutionary path. However, is there such a thing as universal normality? What should the new regime align itself to, insofar as it broke with the revolutionary vanguard, in the radical openness of the future? Inevitably, it sought an appropriate model by recourse to the past.

¹⁸ Paperny V. 1996. *Kultura Dva* (Culture ‘Two’). Moscow: NLO.

In this connection Žižek points out the cultural significance of the anniversary of Alexander Pushkin's death in 1937. Well in advance, at the end of 1935, the government set up the All-Union Pushkin Committee. Masses of workers and peasants were engaged in the preparations for the anniversary. They actively studied the literature legacy of the great poet, firstly though his most accessible works, the fairy tales. Although these facts are common knowledge, Žižek stands out because he pursues this line of argumentation up to a curious rhetorical climax, when he discusses the impact of Stalin's "humanization" on the mode of political decision making in the postwar generation of Soviet rulers.¹⁹ According to his interpretation, this was the ultimate cause when Khrushchev refused to follow the radical advice of his comrade, Castro, who tried to persuade him to use nuclear weapons in the conflict with the USA. The world was saved – and all thanks to Pushkin's fairy tales, one might suggest.

Clearly, the cultural foundation of the Soviet normality and of Stalin's absolutist power was classicism in general, which was in turn based on the antique legacy. Hence, it was not Lenin with the New Economic Policy, but Stalin with the "humanist normalization" who returned to the ancient Greek origins of the civilization. However, it did not happen in the search for the eternal idea of communism. On the contrary, this was a successful attempt to expel revolutionary radicalism beyond the scope of the unfolding socialist project.

In the end, the Soviet experience of the 1920-30s presents a highly diverse picture in respect to the classical Antiquity, from the ideological rejection to the inevitable return to its cultural legacy. This may explain the improbable appearance of such masterpieces – bluntly alien, but at the same time deeply implanted in the eclectic spirit of the era – as *Strogiy yunosha* (A Severe Young Man); director Abram Room (1936), the original script Iurii Olesha (1934). The resolution of the trust, "Ukrainfilm", to put a ban on the movie on June 10th 1936, stated that: "not only did the director never try to overcome the ideological and aesthetic viciousness of the original script, but he did his best to sharply emphasize and throw out its alien "philosophical" foundation and the false visual system".²⁰

The latter was built on such a consequent appropriation of the ancient Greek aesthetics that the only other movie to compare it with would be Leni Riefenstahl's documentary, *Olympia*, released two years later. While the national-socialist ideology always underscored its close links with the ancient Greek legacy, the Soviet censors naturally saw in it only as some "alien

¹⁹ Žižek S. 2008. In *Defence of Lost Causes*. Verso. P. 219.

²⁰ Margolit E., Shmyrov V. 1995. *Excluded Cinema: 1924-1953*. Moscow. (In Russian).

influence”, incompatible with the basic tenets of historical materialism and the general style of social realism. Yet, this connection was by no means a particular improvisation on the part of Room and Olesha, outstepping the conditions of their time. The specific occasion for the creation of the script was provided with Stalin’s “Report to the 17th Congress of the Communist Party” on January 26, 1934. It was here that Stalin compared the Marxist conception of equality with the radical leftist notion of *uravnilovka* (egalitarianism), which, in his words, levels the overall diversity of needs among the members of society, and erases diversity in tastes and in private modes of life.²¹ Yet what foundation of inequality may one introduce into a new type of society, where equality is the highest value? The later history of the USSR showed that in the end the bureaucratic hierarchy would provide the society with the working structural principle of inequality. However, at that moment of the discussed shift in the cultural policy, people like Olesha and Room would rather naturally turn their eyes to the aesthetic and not to the political foundations of social inequality, which were to be sustained in the socialist state.

The main character of the movie, Grisha Fokin, invents “the third complex of GTO”. GTO is an abbreviated name of the All-Union Physical Culture Training Program for the population (introduced in 1931). Combining the *gymnastike* with the *mousike*, as if to please the ancient Greeks, Grisha Fokin completed the sport’s qualifying standards with a series of moral norms. Each Komsomol-member should work out the “Complex of spiritual qualities”, which includes such virtues as: 1) clarity of aims, 2) persistence, 3) steadfastness, 4) humanity (with the amazing explanation: “in order not only to love, but to hate as well”), 5) modesty, 6) sincerity, 7) magnanimity, 8) generosity, 9) sentimentality (again with a remarkable gloss: “in order to like not only marches, but waltzes as well”), 10) intolerance to egoism, and 11) chastity. In the movie, this moral program immediately met with objection; those are typical bourgeois qualities. The moral reformer is, however, adamant: “They are not bourgeois, but humane.” What is called the “humane qualities” in the scenery of Komsomol’s gymnasium, is actually a generalized and, indeed, “eternal” set of antique humanist virtues with an opportunistic Soviet accent.

Such a reaction to the official statement about Marxist hostility to *uravnilovka* was characteristic of many cultural figures. In his paper on the circumstances of the creation of *Strogiy Yunosha*, Arkady Bliumbaum writes that, “antiquating representation of a new human being was rather a typical response to the Party directive among the cultural workers”.²² Indeed, in the special issue (#5, 1934) of the magazine *Tvorchestvo* (Creation), covering exclusively the above mentioned

²¹ Stalin I. 1951. *Sochinenija* (Works). T. 13. Moscow. (In Russian).

²² Bliumbaum A. 2008. “Ozhivajushaja statuja i voploschennaja muzyka (Statue Coming Alive, and Music Embodied)” in: *New Literature Observer* (NLO), #89. (In Russian).

speech of Stalin, the editorial titled “Against asceticism and universal egalitarianism”, was appropriately illustrated with a photo of the sculptor D.P. Schwarz, working on a statue of a discus thrower.

Another analogy is as follows. With *Room* at the same film studio, Ivan Kavaleridze shot a totally different film – a historical drama about the Russian war on the Caucasus in the 19th century. This movie was also banned, but for different reasons. Stalin was said to hate how the director depicted mountain dwellers. *Prima facie*, this story has no relation whatsoever to our subject, but the title of the movie, *Prometheus*, does. Indeed, in the climactic scene the main character recalls the ancient mythos and compares the miserable condition of a simple Russian soldier with the fate of the suffering Titan. Another association of ideas shows that the metaphor was not incidental. Later in the movie an officer, when inspecting captured highlanders, suddenly exclaims: “What warriors! What Apollos!”

Demonstrating the potential of movement towards the “antiquing” of the modernity and fascinating several prominent Soviet cultural workers, such a supra-historical mentality was splendidly rendered in the comic poem by Iurii Olesha and Valentin Stenich that was published after the First Congress of Soviet Writers (1934): “We used to forget about everyday life, | The Muses weaved a crown for us, | Spiritually we were taken back to the Ancient times, | Where a sage spoke with another sage | Under a colonnade, | Where every word sounded like an aphorism ... | In those days Moscow was Hellas, | Multiplied by Communism”.²³

“Hellas, multiplied by Communism” — is that not the same eternal supra-historical idea of communism inspiring the new communist theorists? Apparently, it flashed for a moment even through the obscure Soviet experience, which is now doomed to be forgotten for the sake of the communist comeback.

In his speech at the Congress, Olesha defined communism as both an economic and a moral system. To the first implementers of the moral side of communism he reckoned the younger generation of Soviet people. In his words, “the new socialist attitude to the world is a humane one in the purest sense. It is like the return of the youth”.²⁴ Though this double identification of communism with the ethics of virtues and of virtue with the youth, Olesha was able to resolve an internal conflict that had tormented him during the first years of the new regime. He thought to

²³ Olesha I., Stenich Val. 1934. “V te dni Moskva byla Elladoj (In Those Days Moscow was Hellas)” in: Literaturny Leningrad. October, 8. (In Russian).

²⁴ Pervy vsesojuzny s'ezd sovetskih pisatelej (The First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers). 1934. Moscow. P. 235-6.

belong to the older generation of Soviet people that would not have a chance to see the communist future. The shift from the economic side of communism and the logic of historical materialism to the creative principle of the new society immediately reveals its affinity to Antiquity as the eternal and creative youth of the world.

Conclusion

Some would argue that history has come full circle since 1848, when for the first time Marx and Engels warned about the “spectre of communism” haunting Europe.²⁵ Today their successors talk once again of communism as something clandestine and yet to be discovered. In one of his recent lectures (2012) Žižek spoke about “communism absconditus”: “We should pass, ironically, from revealed communism to maybe not God, but communism absconditus. There are signs, wonderful things are happening here and there, but we [have] absolutely no ontological guarantee, no historical necessity will make... if we believe in it, it's a miracle.”²⁶ Žižek retrieved his updated version of communism not from Karl Marx, but from Blaise Pascal. This reference is instructive, and it presses to conclude that, indeed, as already hinted above, all the similarities notwithstanding, the new communist movement may be going in the opposite direction from Marx. Unlike Pascal, Marx was no theologian and famously stated in *Theses On Feuerbach* that so far the philosophers had only interpreted the world, but the point was to change it. As soon as this philosophical task is back on the agenda, history claims its due and inevitably the Soviet experience is a desert to cross.

²⁵ Marx Karl, Engels Friedrich. *The Communist Manifesto*. From the English edition of 1888, edited by Friedrich Engels.

²⁶ Žižek S. *Communist Absconditus*. // European Graduate School. June 7, 2012, Lecture Transcribed by Roland Bolz. (English). See: <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/communist-absconditus-lecture/> (Last accessed 28 July 2014)

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