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7.

Paul

A renewed sense of 'radical' materialism has become the test of one's politics today, but like other historical returns the first time it occurs, such as in the work of Walter Benjamin, it is a tragedy but today, in the work of Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, and Alain Badiou, it is a farce. They are all currently involved in repeating Benjamin's performance in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in which he identified, using the language of Paul the Apostle, a 'weak messianic power' in the discourse of historical materialism that more so than any positive and reliable knowledge of inequality, such as provided by Marx's labor theory of value, is what truly makes it radical. The argument that Marx's 'scientific socialism' is secretly a form of the very 'ethical' or 'utopian socialism' that he and Engles never failed to critique for serving to normalize the contradictions of capitalism would seem to call into question the supposed 'radicality' of Benjamin's messianic materialism. And yet, it is precisely Benjamin's messianic interpretation of materialism to which Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek have all turned for addressing the inequalities of capitalism.

The latest repetition of Benjamin's messianic conception of history performs the farce that Paul the Apostle is a 'true Leninist' for announcing that radical change begins as 'a change in you', according to Žižek.¹ On this same logic Paul 'subtract[s] truth from the communitarian grasp [of] social class', for Badiou.² Similarly, what Paul teaches us, according to Agamben, is that the true 'revolutionary vocation' today consists of overcoming the 'worst misunderstanding of Marxian thought' of

Slavoj Žižek, The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), p. 9; Slavoj Žižek, 'An Interview with Slavoj Žižek: "On Divine Self-Limitation and Revolutionary Love", with Joshua Delpech-Ramey, Journal of Philosophy and Scripture, 1.2, Spring (2004), pp. 32–38 (p. 36).

² Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. by Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 5.

identifying the proletariat with the working class rather than with the rhetorical gesture of its own 'autosuppression'.³

That such calls for the ideological suppression of class through the exercise of pure faith pass for radical materialism now is related to how they are put forward in opposition to the ludic understanding of the material as the 'materiality of the signifier' that was dominant in the cultural theory of the 1990s influenced by poststructuralist accounts of language (Saussure, de Man, Lacan). The discursive materialism makes social change synonymous with a change in cultural representations and thereby underwrites the cultural common sense that equates freedom with the freedom of speech. Because the inequality and environmental degradation brought about by global capitalism continues to increase and expand despite the freedom of speech, the semiotic democracy announced in poststructuralist theory seems more and more outdated. The increasing inequality has produced an uncomfortable sense of anxiety in cultural theory, and in response it has taken a 'religious turn', as in Derrida's later writings. Derrida's later texts are more concerned with the mystical interpretation of otherness to be found within the traditional framework of Western philosophy from Kant to Heidegger and how this framework may be interpreted as an ethical call of a 'democracy-to-come' that has made his texts more at home in religion departments than on the cutting edge of theory. In response to the religious turn, there has emerged a 'new cultural studies' (Hall) whose central figures are Agamben, Badiou, and Žižek, that claims to reactivate the radical core of materialism as the critique of capitalism from its outside. It is this supposed new radicalism that is the focus of my discussion here.

In different ways all these writers are currently involved in returning materialism to its radical commitment to contest inequality at its root, following Marx's usage of radical. They thus contest the equation of materialism in poststructuralist theory with difference and its allied notion of semiotic democracy as the limit of the radical. Žižek for instance is against the 'Messianic turn of deconstruction [for relying on] a figure of the Other who really believes [so as to justify] the permanent use of the devices of ironic disassociation [toward any radical commitment to the

³ Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 31.

critique of capitalism]'.⁴ Badiou as well argues that the 'contemporary situation consist[s] of [...] a cultural and historical relativism' in public opinion as well as academic philosophy that produces 'identities [...] that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market'.⁵ Meanwhile, Agamben has argued that the metaphysical separation of language from the authentic human experience of it to be found in Derrida's writings has become the central political logic of capitalist society today that justifies a condition of 'bare life' in which individuals can be killed outside the coverage of any legal norms that would give their deaths any collective meaning.⁶ Using Benjamin's theory of modernity as a permanent 'state of emergency', Agamben argues that democracy today represents the violent curtailment of freedom rather than providing for its realization. And yet, at the same time, their return to a radical materialist critique of the culture of global capitalism is arrived at through Benjamin's messianic materialism which calls into question the radical commitment of the 'new' cultural theory to move beyond the religious turn by providing root knowledge of inequality.

Following Benjamin's messianic materialism, Badiou, Agamben, and Žižek have all in various ways argued that Pauline Christianity, because of its translation of the material into the immaterial, represents the most radical understanding of inequality today — more so than Marx's scientific socialism. In Paul's writings this notion appears as the transcendence of class by a spiritual act of faith in the miracle of Christ's resurrection as having inaugurated a messianic age in which inequality is overcome. What this does to class in his writings can be read in his First Letter to the Corinthians (7:20–22; 24) when he writes

Let each of you stay in the condition in which you were called. Art thou a slave? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a slave, is the Lord's free man: likewise also he that is called, being free, is slave of the Messiah [...] Let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

⁴ Žižek, Puppet, p. 6.

⁵ Badiou, Saint Paul, pp. 6, 11.

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience, trans. by Liz Heron (New York: Verso Books, 2007), p. 56; Giorgio Agamben, Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

For Agamben, Paul's language here represents 'the neutralization [that] social conditions in general undergo as a consequence of the messianic event' which signifies for him 'the expropriation of every [...] substantial social identity [especially in terms of a 'determinate social class'] under the form of the as not'.7 Žižek agrees with Agamben's reading of the passage adding that it 'has nothing to do with the legitimation of the existing power relations' because it 'suspends the performative force of the 'normal' ideological interpellation that compels us to accept our determinate place within the sociosymbolic edifice', and this through an act of 'pure voluntarism' such that change amounts to 'a change in you'.⁸ That such a banal commonplace as that 'change is a change in you' is taken to be the ultra of revolutionary thought today I take quite literally. What Žižek's blurting out of such self-help marketing slogans as radical change shows, is that whatever other radical, philosophical, or Marxist-sounding things he says, his basic assumption remains that change emerges immanently from within the terms of the ideological rather than from outside ideology in the labor arrangements. Far from being a revolutionary principle, 'change is a change in you' is deeply conservative because it underwrites the common sense of class societies that it is ideological change within the terms of exploitation that represents freedom and democracy rather than the abolition of exploitation and the realization of economic freedom from need.

In order to make Paul's belief that 'change is a change in you' appear radical now, Žižek, Agamben and Badiou all make use of the apocalyptic language Benjamin takes from Paul, that Benjamin formalizes as life in a permanent 'state of emergency'. And so one finds Žižek announcing that we are 'living in the end times' of capitalism and that therefore any form of 'fundamental belief' becomes radical because it symbolically contests the privatization of the commons and the cynical 'disavowed form of belief' in the place of the Other to which it gives rise. Agamben of course famously takes the US concentration camp at Guantanamo Bay and the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns as models of global capitalism today because of how they violently reduce the population to 'bare life' thus justifying the need to recover a belief that change is possible at a time when the idea of common humanity 'threatens to disappear

⁷ Agamben, Time That Remains, pp. 13, 31.

⁸ Žižek, Puppet, p. 112; 'Interview', n. pag.

irretrievably', as Benjamin argued.9

Benjamin's messianic materialism in which he uses Paul's voiding of class as an image of classless society has proven to be so useful to the new cultural theory because of the way his text makes it seem as if ideology is central to determining the shape of the social rather than economics. As in Althusser's formulation, ideology for Benjamin is not so much a false consciousness of class as Marx argues, but rather 'a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' the function of which is primarily political rather than economic, i.e., to produce compliant subjects who find pleasure within the maintenance of the system rather than in opposition to it. In his texts Benjamin separates ideology entirely from the underlying labor relations in a manner similar to Althusser by his reading of history in terms of ethical belief, which has the effect of translating class from an economic antagonism inscribed in production into a cultural clash of values. As a result he produces a conception of history as 'dialectics at a standstill': an image of history as an eternal clash between the belief that human perfectibility lies in the mastery of nature through technological progress and, in eternal opposition to such an ethics of mastery, the weak messianic belief in a classless society that sides with the oppressed. Benjamin's main point of contention in the text would thus seem to be to break with Marx and Engels' historical materialist explanation in The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* for why 'the proletariat alone is a really revolutionary class' because it is the 'special and essential product' of the process of capitalist accumulation, as he claims that 'nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current' of history.¹⁰

According to Benjamin, the 'weak messianic power' that secretly programs historical materialism despite its manifest 'material content' as a scientific socialism lies in its commitment to represent 'history from below' as a repudiation of the conformity to any conception of historical laws, such as he attributes to 'universal history'. Benjamin's history from

⁹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken, 1977), p. 255.

¹⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Manifesto of the Communist Party', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), 6, pp. 477–519 (p. 494); Benjamin, 'Philosophy of History', p. 258.

below consists of finding a 'secret agreement between past generations and the present one' in the 'image of happiness' and 'redemption' they project onto us.¹¹ The messianic power of these images lies in the recognition of their weakness in the face of the ruling class forces intent on mastery and subjugation at a time when happiness 'threatens to disappear irretrievably' under 'the 'state of emergency' in which we live [that] is no[longer] the exception but the rule'.¹² In other words, against the belief that human freedom lies in technological mastery and progress, Benjamin contrasts the belief that what truly makes us human is our weakness and vulnerability in the midst of hardship and oppression, which is what requires us to 'empathize' with each other and in the process find moments of 'happiness' just the same. The use of history from below against universal history he takes to be messianic in its analogy to the Christ myth as it symbolically 'resurrects' the dead and 'redeems' or 'transfigures' the past by siding with the 'weak' and 'vanquishing' belief in the discourse of mastery.¹³ He takes the messianic to be radical because it repeats an awareness that he considers 'characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of action', that they are about to 'make the continuum of history explode'.¹⁴

While Benjamin's text is clearly intent on secularizing the Christ myth in terms of class, at the same time it relies on a mythic image of history as 'dialectics at a standstill' which occults the class inequality and struggle inscribed in the economic base and inverts the material with the immaterial. But there can be no social change without the positive and reliable knowledge of what makes class inequality, and what Benjamin's messianism amounts to in the end, I argue, is the counsel to find happiness in the midst of bare survival, and, as in the re-newed faith of Paul, it represents therefore a therapeutic retreat in cultural theory of learning to live with capitalism rather than overthrowing it.

Making ideology a question of subjective belief and symbolic attachments rather than a false consciousness of class makes it seem as if the primary function of ideology is to provide individuals with a sense of the real that conforms to the dominant social arrangements

¹¹ Ibid., p. 254.

¹² Ibid., pp. 255, 257.

¹³ Ibid., p. 255.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 261.

and thus to make change appear in the guise of pure voluntarism as 'a change in you'. Such a view of ideology itself conforms to the dominant cultural politics that makes people's values seem more important than their class position and what the class structure compels them to do. Conversely, Marx's theory of ideology as the false consciousness of class represents a critique of the subject as the locus of agency that is central to the dominant (bourgeois) cultural politics. Whatever one believes, the notion that belief matters in terms of motivating or compelling individuals represents a mystification of 'the real motive forces impelling' individuals, as Engels writes, which is a matter of what Marx calls 'the silent compulsion of economic relations'.¹⁵ The specifics of beliefs are conditioned by the social division of labor and where one stands in relation to capital — whether one owns and controls the wealth of society extracted from the labor of the working class or whether one is without property, having only one's personal labor to sell in exchange for wages. To argue that belief is what really matters under such conditions is to invert the material cause with its immaterial effect as if it were 'the consciousness of men that determines their existence' rather than 'their social existence that determines their consciousness', as Marx argues.¹⁶ The messianic materialism which puts belief over class, far from being radical or even new, represents a revival of the 'opium of the people' which feeds them spiritual illusions about what is to be done to change capitalism and realize a society in which 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs' is the rule.¹⁷

¹⁵ Frederick Engels, 'Letters on Historical Materialism', *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. by Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), pp. 760–68 (p. 766); Karl Marx, *Capital*, *A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, intro. by Ernest Mandel, trans. by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 899.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, 'Preface' to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Karl Marx/ Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1987), 29, pp. 261–65 (p. 263).

¹⁷ Karl Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1984), 24, pp. 75–99 (p. 87).