

## Stephen Tumino



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# 8. Occupy

A spectre is haunting Europe — the spectre of communism [...] It is high time to meet this nursery tale of the Spectre of Communism with a manifesto of the party itself.

- Karl Marx and Frederick Engels

### The 'Spectre' of Communism

To hear the 'mainstream' corporate media tell it, Occupy Wall Street represents the ghost of communism risen from the dead.

From right-wing commentators like Glenn Beck to liberal establishment news outlets like The New York Times, the Occupy movement has been labeled 'communist' because it has raised the issue of class inequality in the US.

Here for example is what Glenn Beck had to say about it:

You have people on the streets calling for revolution [...] This is a Marxist revolution that is global in its nature [...] The leaders of the movement [...] [are] saying, we're not here to reform, we're going to collapse the system. We're not here to reform it. They're calling openly for revolution.<sup>1</sup>

And what is driving this revolution according to Beck?

It is not the growing inequality in this country that's to blame the fact that real wages have not risen in 40 years, that half the population is in poverty according to the US Census Bureau, that one in seven are 'food insecure', one in six are unemployed and lack health insurance, that millions are losing their homes, and millions struggle with massive student debt.<sup>2</sup> No, what's behind it is the professors: 'We are paying,

<sup>1</sup> 'Glenn Beck: Occupy is SEIU world Marxist movement', YouTube, 14 October 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\_Dsdofs4lNE&ab\_channel=ToddWTIC [accessed 8 June 2024].

<sup>&#</sup>x27;99% v 1%: the data behind the Occupy movement, Guardian animations', YouTube, 2

our institutions, our higher learning institutions, to indoctrinate our kids into Marxism', he says.

Echoing Beck's reaction to Occupy, on November 7, *The New York Times* published a piece in its Education section on the occasion of the 94th year anniversary of the Russian Revolution of 1917 that brought the Communist Party to power.<sup>3</sup> In this article they warn their readers that revolutionary social movements that would base themselves on 'Karl Marx's class distinction between "haves" and "have-nots"' have historically 'led to the [...] execution and starvation of millions of people'. The *Times* article then goes on to imply that Occupy is such a movement because the Occupy website says, 'The one thing we all have in common is that we are the 99 percent that will no longer tolerate the greed and corruption of the 1 percent'.

Judging by the panicky reaction to Occupy by the corporate media, it seems that the US has for so long been obsessed with culture wars and identity politics that when a social movement emerges that explicitly addresses the growing class inequality in this country, they imagine it must be Marxist inspired 'terrorism'.

Their fearful reaction, however, exposes their own class bias. In their way of thinking, it is not the injustice and inequality of the system that enriches the few at the expense of the many that's the problem, but the people openly expressing their dissatisfaction with social inequality that is, and the corporate media scapegoats them as dangerous and violent types intent on destroying civilization. Marxism, in their imaginary, operates as a catch-all bogeyman intended to scare the workers into seeing any resistance to capitalism as 'foreign', 'violent', and a threat to the 'American way of life'.

<sup>18</sup> November 2011 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DxvVZe2fnvI&ab\_ channel=TheGuardian [accessed 8 June 2024].

<sup>3 &#</sup>x27;Nov. 7, 1917 | Russian Government Overthrown in Bolshevik Revolution', The Learning Network, *The New York Times*, 7 November 2011, https://archive.nytimes. com/learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/11/07/nov-7–1917-russian-governmentoverthrown-in-bolshevik-revolution

#### The 'Nursery-Tale' of Communism

But there is another way too that Occupy is thought to be communist.

As an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* explains, many of the ideas that lie behind the Occupy movement can be found in the writings of the academic left, especially those of Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and Slavoj Žižek who all openly proclaim themselves communists.<sup>4</sup>

But what kind of communism is this?

Žižek explains at the Occupy encampment in New York City:

The only sense in which we are communists is that we care for the commons: the commons of nature; the commons of what is privatized by intellectual property; the commons of biogenetics. For this and only for this we should fight. Communism failed absolutely. But the problems of the commons are here. They are telling you we are not Americans here. But the conservative fundamentalists who claim they are really American have to be reminded of something. What is Christianity? It's the Holy Spirit. What's the Holy Spirit? It's an egalitarian community of believers who are linked by love for each other. And who only have their own freedom and responsibility to do it. In this sense the Holy Spirit is here now. And down there on Wall Street there are pagans who are worshipping blasphemous idols.<sup>5</sup>

If communism means Žižek's 'nursery tale' of overcoming our differences through the power of love to defend our common (national) interests against the greedy few who would personally enrich themselves at others' expense, then Glenn Beck has nothing to worry about because what he fears is only a ghost — the 'spirit' of Jesus, not the theory of Marx.

For Marx, on the contrary, communism 'is in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered, by this or that would-be universal reformer' — it is not the nursery tale of how shared beliefs will produce an egalitarian community, which is precisely the kind of 'utopian socialism' that Marx's 'scientific socialism' was

<sup>4</sup> Dan Berrett, 'Intellectual Roots of Wall St. Protest Lie in Academe', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 October 2011, https://www.chronicle.com/article/intellectual-roots-of-wall-st-protest-lie-in-academe/

<sup>5 &#</sup>x27;Slavoj Žižek at OWS Part 2', YouTube, 9 October 2011 https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=7UpmUly9It4&ab\_channel=visitordesign [accessed 8 June 2024].

a critique of.<sup>6</sup> Rather, it is 'a question of what the proletariat is, and what, in accordance with this being, it will historically be compelled to do' given 'its own life situation as well as in the whole organization of bourgeois society today' that explains the idea of communism according to Marx and Engels.<sup>7</sup>

What Marx's idea of communism requires is the opposite of belief, of only looking at the world the way we would like it to be rather than understanding how it is. What it means is taking a closer look at the 'actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes'.<sup>8</sup> According to Marx, communists 'do not confront the world in a doctrinaire way with a new principle: Here is the truth, kneel down before it!' but rather 'merely show the world what it is really fighting for'.<sup>9</sup> Communism, in Marx's terms, is thus 'not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself' but 'the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things'.<sup>10</sup>

Take class, for example.

On Marx's terms, class is not merely a problem of the unfair distribution of income between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' that will change by people becoming less greedy and more ethical. Class, for Marx, explains the global division of labor that exists between those who own and control the means of production of social wealth and those who own nothing but their labor power which they must sell to the employers in order to live. Class inequality will only change, therefore, when the workers end their economic exploitation by capital and take control of production and establish a society in which the rule is 'from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs'.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> 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. 498).

<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism', Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 4, pp. 5–211 (p. 37).

<sup>8 &#</sup>x27;Manifesto', p. 498.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, 'Marx to Ruge in Kreuznach', September 1843, *Karl Marx/Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, 50 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 3, pp. 141–45 (p. 144).

<sup>10</sup> Marx and Engels, 'German Ideology', p. 49.

<sup>11</sup> 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).

Like the mainstream commentary, Žižek's idea of communism as defense of the idea of community only addresses inequality as if it were a problem of the unfair distribution of wealth and power. While Glenn Beck thinks that any re-distribution of wealth from the rich to the poor would create a violent disruption of an otherwise peaceful, fair, and just society, Žižek thinks that the re-distribution of wealth from the poor to the rich that has been the norm since Reagan's presidency is brutal, unjust, and needs to be made fairer. Communism for Žižek amounts to a fairer distribution of wealth in which we do not sacrifice the common good in order to make a few people rich. If the Occupy protests are communist in the way Žižek argues, however, and what is being protested is only corporate 'greed and corruption' as the Occupy website says, then it is not the cause of the class inequality that lies in the daily exploitation of labor by capital at the point of production that is being opposed, but only the effects of class on culture because of the way the special interests of a tiny minority have been allowed to dominate social and political life.

But by only protesting the cultural effects of class ('greed and corruption'), rather than the cause of the stark inequality that we see, the dominant belief that capitalism may be made 'fair' and 'democratic' is maintained. The effect of this belief is to make it seem as if the daily exploitation of the working class by the capitalist class is normal and therefore acceptable — it's just the way things are and, therefore, ought to be.

By making it seem as if the roots of inequality lie in personal greed and unfairness — and not the law of profit that exploits labor — it becomes impossible to understand and abolish class inequality at its roots. What Žižek and other 'left' theorists promote as 'communism' presumes that if we only make the system a little fairer, with a little more regulation of Wall Street and a little more protection for workers, then everything will go back to the way it was in some mythological past and democracy will be restored.

However, without a basic understanding of class that critiques the dominant ideology that normalizes capitalism by representing it as open to being made 'fair' and 'democratic', it is impossible to change it, and the domination of social and political life by the 1% will continue.

People interested in the Occupy movement have worried that it will

be co-opted by the Democrats and diverted from being a movement against social inequality into merely a movement to re-elect Obama and hope for piecemeal reforms. But given the focus on the 'greed and corruption' of corporate rule and given the lack of a critique of capitalism that exposes its basic class inequality and explains why there cannot be democracy while classes exist, it is clear that, at least at the level of ideas, Occupy was always already co-opted into an ideological support of the existing class system. It is for this reason that even the Republicans were able to use the language of Occupy for their own electoral strategies in 2012, as Newt Gingrich and Rick Perry did by attacking the 'vulture capitalism' of Mitt Romney's investment firm during the primaries. This ideological limitation and accommodation to bourgeois norms means that Occupy is yet another reformist attempt to save capitalism at a time of crisis rather than a genuine worker's movement to replace capitalism - which is a system for making profit for a few off of the labor of the many — with socialism — a system whose primary purpose is meeting the needs of the many by abolishing the exploitation of labor by capital.

And yet, what drove people into the Occupy protests, whether or not they realized it — from New York City to Oakland, Detroit and Pittsburgh, to Austin, Charleston, Fort Lauderdale, all over the US and around the world — is not the corruption of democracy by greedy corporations but the crisis of the capitalist system itself.

#### The ABCs of Communism

Speaking at the Occupy encampment in New York City Richard Wolff reflected on Marx's idea of communism:

When Marx wrote his critique his image of capitalism's end was not that it was attacked from outside, was not that it was in danger from 'terrorists'. Marx's argument is that capitalism would survive unless and until the internal contradictions, the things about it that undermine each other, make it collapse and make the people who live in that collapse declare that a new and different system has to be begun. That's what's looming here. And Marx if he were here today would have a big grin and probably say, in good German, 'I told you so!'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12 &#</sup>x27;Richard Wolff OWS of WS', YouTube, 25 October 2011 https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=Q261bPJ-sCo&ab\_channel=ChristopherBrown [accessed 8 June 2024].

Leaving aside that the purpose of Wolff's speech was to popularize a messianic vision of a more just society based on workplace democracy, Wolff is right about one thing: Marx's original contribution to the idea of communism is that it is an historical and material movement produced by the failure of capitalism, not a moral crusade to reform it.

Today we are confronted with the fact that capitalism has failed in exactly the way that Marx explained was inevitable.<sup>13</sup> It has 'simplified the class antagonism'; by concentrating wealth and centralizing power in the hands of a few it has succeeded in dispossessing the masses of people of everything except their labor power.<sup>14</sup> As a result it has revealed that the ruling class 'is unfit to rule', as *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* concludes, 'because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him'.<sup>15</sup> And the slaves are thus compelled to fight back.

Capitalism makes communism necessary because it has brought into being an international working class whose common conditions of life give them not only the need but also the economic power to establish a society in which the rule is 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'.<sup>16</sup>

Unless and until we confront the fact that capitalism has once again brought the world to the point of taking sides for or against the system as a whole, communism will continue to be just a bogeyman or a nursery-tale to frighten and soothe the conscience of the owners, rather than what it is — the materialist theory that is an absolute requirement for our emancipation from exploitation and a new society freed from necessity! As Lenin said, 'Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement'.<sup>17</sup>

We are confronted with an historic crisis of global proportions that demands of us that we take Marxism seriously as something that needs

<sup>13</sup> Nouriel Roubini, 'Karl Marx Was Right', WSJ/Video, 12 August 2011 https://www. wsj.com/video/nouriel-roubini-karl-marx-was-right/68EE8F89-EC24-42F8-9B9D-47B510E473B0.html [accessed 8 June 2024].

<sup>14 &#</sup>x27;Manifesto', p. 485.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 495–96

<sup>16</sup> Marx, 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', p. 87.

<sup>17</sup> V. I. Lenin, 'What Is to Be Done?: Burning Questions of Our Movement', V. I. Lenin Collected Works, 45 vols (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), 5, pp. 347–529 (p. 369).

to be studied to find solutions to the problems of today.

Perhaps then we can even begin to understand communism in the way that *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* presents it as 'the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority' to end inequality forever.<sup>18</sup>