

# Our contemporary impotence

**Alain Badiou**

We have, in this conference, discussed all of the crucial aspects of the situation in Europe and especially in Greece. We have, of course, analysed the great historical structures at stake: the particularly aggressive global politics of contemporary capitalism, the complicit weakness of the various states, and the reactive role played by Europe as it now stands, but also the law of subjective forms that illuminates the contemporary dialectic of submission and insurrection. We have also taken stock of the urgency of militant demands – those that issue from the ordeals that increasing poverty and the destruction of social forms have imposed on the people, and others issuing from the increasingly arrogant actions of fascist gangs, who play on absolutely cruel nationalist themes and absolutely intolerable racist realities. To this end, we have all tried to assess the ongoing acts of resistance.

I have nothing to add to all of this, so far as the immediate characteristics of the situation in Greece is concerned. One of my great teachers or masters [*mâîtres*] in the domain of communist politics [Mao Zedong] used to say ‘No investigation, no right to speak!’ Unlike other contributors to our colloquium, our Greek friends in particular, I have not, after all, undertaken a political or militant investigation into the situation that serves as our point of reference here. I know that the experience of a new political situation can be understood only from within its own process, that ordinary information and opinions do not suffice. And this is for a very simple reason: political novelty, which is subjective, does not allow itself to be grasped from the outside while it is in the process of constituting itself. This is, moreover, what the master I cited a moment ago meant when he added: ‘to investigate a problem is to solve it’. And I have neither the capacity nor the intention of solving any of the problems that currently beset the Greek people.

My subjectivity here is therefore broadly external to the sequence in question. I will accept the limits of this position, and begin with a feeling, an affect,

which is perhaps personal, perhaps unjustified, but which I nevertheless feel, given the information at my disposal: a feeling of general political impotence. What is currently happening in Greece is something like a concentrate of this feeling.

I certainly admire the eloquence of my friend and comrade Costas Douzinas, who has buttressed his avowed optimism with precise references to what he takes to be the political novelties of the people’s resistance in Greece, where he has even discerned the emergence of a new political subject.<sup>1</sup> But I am not convinced. Of course, the courage and tactical inventiveness of progressive and anti-fascist demonstrators that Costas has evoked is cause for enthusiasm. Such things, moreover, are thoroughly necessary. But novel? No, not at all. They are the invariant features of every real mass movement: egalitarianism, mass democracy, the invention of slogans, bravery, the speed of reactions... We saw all of these same things, undertaken with the same energy – joyful and always a little anxious – in May ’68, in France. We have seen them more recently in Tahrir Square in Egypt. Indeed, truth be told, these things must have already been at work in the times of Spartacus or Thomas Münzer. Some forty years ago, I suggested calling these determinations ‘the communist invariants’, and today I would say, more precisely: the invariant characteristics of movement communism. Properly political novelties, and a new political subject, are something else: their vitality demands movement, but can never be confounded with it.

And so let us set out, provisionally, from another point of departure.

Greece is a country with a very long history, one of universal significance. It is a country whose resistance to successive oppressions and occupations has a particular historical density. It’s a country where the communist movement, including the form of armed struggle, has been very powerful. A country where, even today, the youth set an example by sustaining

massive and tenacious revolts. A country where, without a doubt, the classic reactionary forces are very well organized, but where there is also the courageous and ample resource of the great popular movements. A country where there are certainly formidable fascist organizations, but a country where there is also a leftist party with an apparently solid electoral and militant base.

Now, everything in this country happens as if nothing could stop the utter domination of capitalism, unleashed by its own crisis. As if, under the direction of ad hoc committees and servile governments, the country had no alternative but to follow the savagely anti-popular decrees of the European bureaucracy. Indeed, with regard to the questions posed and their European 'solutions', the resistance movement looks more like a delaying tactic than the bearer of a genuine political alternative.

Such is the great lesson of the times, inviting us not only to support the courage of the Greek people with all our strength, but to join them in meditating on what must be thought and done so that this courage should not be, in a despairing way, a useless courage.

For what is striking – in Greece above all, but elsewhere as well, particularly in France – is the manifest impotence of the progressive forces to compel even the slightest meaningful retreat of the economic and state powers that are seeking to submit the people unreservedly to the new (though also long-standing and fundamental) law of thoroughgoing liberalism.

Not only are the progressive forces making no headway, and failing to score even a limited success, but it's instead the forces of fascism that have been growing and that, against the illusory backdrop of a xenophobic and racist nationalism, now claim to lead the opposition to the European administrations' decrees.

My feeling is that the root cause of this impotence is not, at bottom, the people's inertia, a lack of courage, or a majority support for 'necessary evils'. Many testimonies, even here at this very colloquium, have shown us that the resources for a vigorous and massive popular resistance exist in Greece. Even in France, with the actions against Sarkozy's pension reform – a reform that is of a piece with the dismantling of public services and crucial institutions of social assistance by servile bureaucracies, whose decrees are unanimously relayed by the acting governments – we have seen that significant popular elements demonstrate their capacity for stubborn resistance and enact the invariants of movement communism, notably the use of unconventional forms of strike and assemblies subtracted

from trade-unionist hegemony. Nevertheless, no new thinking of politics has emerged on a mass scale from these attempts, no new vocabulary has emerged from the rhetoric of protest, and the union bosses have finally managed to convince everyone that we must wait... for elections.

I think that what we are experiencing today is instead that the majority of the political categories movement activists are trying to use to think and transform our current situations are, as they now stand, largely inoperative.

In truth, after the sweeping movements of the 1960s and 1970s, we have inherited a very long counter-revolutionary period, economically, politically and ideologically. This counter-revolution has effectively destroyed the confidence and power that were once able to commit popular consciousness to the most elementary words of emancipatory politics – words, to cite a few at random, like 'class struggle', 'general strike', 'nationalization without compensation', 'revolution', 'clandestine action', 'worker-student alliance', 'national liberation', 'people's dictatorship', 'mass democracy', 'proletarian party', and many others... The key word of 'communism', which dominated the political stage since the beginning of the nineteenth century, is itself henceforth confined to a sort of historical infamy, regarding which it must indeed be admitted that the historical account in which even progressive opinion is set has been entirely dictated by the enemy. That the equation 'communism = totalitarianism' should come to appear as natural and be unanimously accepted is an indication of how badly revolutionaries failed during the disastrous 1980s. Of course, we also cannot avoid an incisive and severe criticism of what the socialist states and communist parties in power, especially in the Soviet Union, had become. But this criticism should be *our own*. It should nourish our own theories and practices, helping them to progress, and not lead to some kind of morose renunciation, throwing out the political baby with the historical bathwater. This has led to an astonishing state of affairs: regarding a historical episode of capital importance for us, we have adopted, practically without restriction, the point of view of the enemy. And those who haven't done so have simply persevered in the old lugubrious rhetoric, as if nothing had happened.

Of all the victories of our enemy – in whose ranks we should list the new guard dogs of the contemporary ideological order, who have almost always been renegades from the movement of the 1960s – this symbolic victory is among the most important. Not only have we allowed our own vocabulary to be discredited

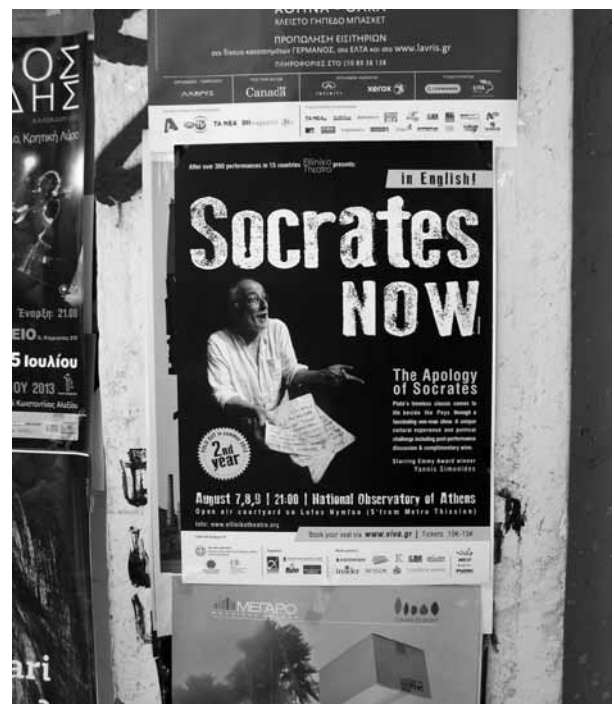
and ridiculed, when it is not simply treated as criminal, but we ourselves make use of the enemy's favourite words as if they were our own. This is particularly the case for the situation that interests us, with the words 'democracy', 'economy', 'Europe', and several others. Even the meaning of rather neutral expressions, like 'people' [*les gens*], is for the most part dependent on polls and the media, and incorporated into nonsensical turns of phrase like 'people think that...'

Back in the day of the old communisms, we used to heap mockery on what we called *langue de bois*, or hackneyed, clichéd language – empty words and pompous adjectives. Of course, of course. But the existence of a common language is also that of a shared Idea. The efficacy of mathematics in the sciences – and it cannot be denied that mathematics is a magnificent *langue de bois* – has everything to do with the fact that it formalizes the scientific idea. The ability to quickly formalize the analysis of a situation and the tactical consequences of that analysis is no less required in politics. It is a sign of strategic vitality.

Today, one of the great powers of the official democratic ideology is precisely that it has, at its disposal, a *langue de bois* that is spoken in every medium and by every one of our governments without exception. Who could believe that terms like 'democracy', 'freedoms', 'market economy', 'human rights', 'balanced budget', 'national effort', 'the French people', 'competitiveness', 'reforms', and so on, are anything other than elements of an omnipresent *langue de bois*? We are the ones, we militants without a strategy of emancipation, who are (and who have been for some time now) the real aphasics! And it is not the sympathetic and unavoidable language of movementist democracy that will save us. 'Down with this or that', 'all together we will win', 'get out', 'resistance!', 'it is right to rebel'... All of this is capable of momentarily summoning forth collective affects, and, tactically, this is all very useful – but it leaves the question of a legible strategy entirely unresolved. This is too poor a language for a situated discussion of the future of emancipatory actions.

The key to political success certainly lies in the force of rebellion, its scope and courage. But also in its discipline, and in the *declarations that it is capable of* – declarations having to do with a positive strategic future, and that reveal a new possibility that remained invisible amidst the enemy's propaganda. This is what the organized militants of a movement, or of any situation, ought to extract from what is said and done; this is what they ought to formalize and to refer for broader discussion to the popular base of the movement or situation. This is why the existence of

sweeping popular movements, although it may well be a historical phenomenon, does not by itself furnish a political vision. The reason for this is that what cements a movement on the basis of individual affects is always of a negative character: the sort of thing that proceeds from abstract negations, like 'down with capitalism', or 'stop the layoffs', or 'no to austerity', or 'down with the European troika', which have strictly no other effect than provisionally soldering the movement with the negative frailty of its affects; as for more specific negations, since their target is precise and they bring together different strata of the population, like 'down with Mubarak', during the Arab Spring, they can indeed achieve a result, but they can never construct



the *politics* of that result, as we see today in Egypt and in Tunisia, where reactionary religious parties reap the rewards of the movement, to which they have no true relation. For every politics becomes the regimentation of what it affirms and proposes, and not of what it negates or rejects. A politics is an active and organized conviction, a thought in action that indicates unseen possibilities. Watchwords like 'resistance!' are certainly suitable for bringing individuals together, but they also risk making such an assembly nothing more than a joyful and enthusiastic mixture of historical existence and political frailty, only to become, once the enemy (who is far better politically, discursively and governmentally equipped) wins the day, a bitter redoubling and sterile repetition of failure.

The political master whom I cited earlier also used to say 'You can't solve a problem? Well, get down and investigate the present facts and its past history!' The

current situation in the world closely resembles that of the years 1840–50. Then, too, after the French Revolution of 1792–94, just as after the uprisings, revolutions and victorious people's wars of the 1960s and 1970s, we have a very long counter-revolutionary sequence, dominated by a vigorous liberal capitalist drive to globalization. Then, too, between 1847 and 1849, there was something like a 'Peoples' Spring' throughout Europe, as would later come to pass throughout the Arab world, and also in a few 'Western' situations. Then, too, on the side of the rebels we find a language that is enthusiastic, democratic and revolutionary, but also impoverished and without unity. And then, too, we find everywhere the subsequent triumph of reactionaries and the rise to power of financial speculators and new forms of corruption. It is not until after decades of organized labour, such as the creation of the First International or the unification of the social-democratic parties, and after glorious but desperate endeavours like the Paris Commune or the Russian Revolution of 1905, that the political capacity of the workers surges forth, ready for victory, and embodied, as it must be, in international organizations. Again, it was necessary for the language of Marxism to become practically hegemonic not only throughout the entire workers' movement, but also, in the end, among the vast rural masses, whether in China or in countries subject to colonial terror.

Indeed it seems that it's not in the contagion of a negative affect of resistance that we might find what it takes to compel a serious retreat of the reactionary forces that, today, seek to disintegrate every form of thought and action that refuses to follow them. It is in the shared discipline of a common idea and the increasingly widespread usage of a homogeneous language.

The reconstruction of such a language is a crucial imperative. It is to this end that I have sought to reintroduce, redefine and reorganize everything that hinges on the word 'communism'.

We should point out, in passing, that the word 'communism' denotes three fundamental things.

First of all, it denotes the *analytic observation* according to which, in today's dominant societies, freedom, whose democratic fetishization we're all familiar with, is, in fact, entirely dominated by property. 'Freedom' is nothing but the freedom to acquire every possible commodity without any pre-established limit, and the power to do 'what one wants' is strictly measured by the extent of this acquisition. Someone who has lost any possibility of acquiring something does not, as a matter of fact, have any kind of freedom,

as is plain to see, for instance, with the 'vagabonds' that the English liberals of rising capitalism executed by hanging, without any qualms.. This is the reason why Marx, in the *Manifesto*, declares that all the injunctions of communism can, in a sense, be reduced to just one: the abolition of private property.

Next, 'communism' signifies the *historical hypothesis* according to which *it is not necessary* that freedom be ruled by property, and human societies be directed by a strict oligarchy of powerful businessmen and their servants in politics, the police, the military and the media. A society is possible in which what Marx calls 'free association' predominates, where productive labour is collectivized, where the disappearance of the great non-egalitarian contradictions (between intellectual and manual labour, between town and country, between men and women, between management and labour, etc. ...) is under way, and where decisions that concern everyone are really everyone's business. We should treat this egalitarian possibility as a principle of thought and action, and not let go of it.

Finally, 'communism' designates the need for an *international political organization*. This organization sets out from the encounter between the principles and the effective action of the popular masses. On this basis, it endeavours to set people's inventive thinking in motion, to construct, in a fashion unalloyed with the existing state, a power internal to any given situation. The goal is for this power to be capable of bending the real in the direction prescribed by the tying together of principles with the active subjectivity of all who have the will to transform the situation in question.

The word 'communism' thus names *the complete process by which freedom is freed from its non-egalitarian submission to property*. That this word has been the one that our enemies have most doggedly opposed has to do with the fact that they cannot endure this process, which would indeed destroy *their* freedom, the norm of which is fixed by property. After all, this doggedness alone, this ferocious will to criminalize the word 'communism' – which began in the nineteenth century, well before the experience of the socialist states – amounts to what the Chinese call 'teaching by negative example': if that is what our enemies detest above all, then it is with its rediscovery that we must begin.

No doubt, and I will finish with this point, we must also be as clear as possible, especially when faced with gangs of fascists, about what we mean when we use the word 'people'. It's a matter of connecting the word 'people' to the reconstruction of the word 'communism'.

This connection passes through the four possible senses of the word 'people': the fascist sense, the statist and juridical sense, the sense it takes in struggles of national liberation, and the sense it has in political actions aiming at egalitarian emancipation.

In this classification, we have two negative senses of the word 'people'. The first, and most obvious, is the one that anchors a closed – and always fictional – racial or national identity. The historical existence of this kind of 'people' demands the construction of a despotic state, which violently brings into existence the fiction that founds it. The second – which is more discreet, but, on a grand scale, even more noxious, owing to its suppleness and the consensus it enjoys – is one that subordinates the recognition of a 'people' to a state that is supposedly legitimate and benevolent, simply because it helps a middle class to grow (when it can) and to persist (in any case), a middle class that is free to consume the worthless products on which capital fattens it, and thus free to say whatever it wants, so long as what it says has no effect on the general mechanism. We see easily enough that the first sense is a usage that is practically obligatory in fascist politics. The second is the one that dominates our parliamentary democracies. Let's say that it's the race-people that is at stake in the first case, and what we could call the middle-class-people in the second.

We, likewise, have two positive senses of the word 'people'. The first is the constitution of a people in the scope of their historical existence, in so far as this scope is denied by colonial and imperial domination, or by an invader. 'People' thus exists according to the future anterior of an inexistent state. It is a matter of liberating the people from their subjection, from their negation, starting from the idea of a new, popular state. The second is the existence of a people which declares itself to be a people through a process that starts from its hard kernel [*noyau dur*], which is precisely what the official state excludes from 'its' supposedly legitimate people. For example, the workers of the nineteenth century, the peasants in every country subject to colonization, or today, again, members of the proletariat who have come from abroad. Such a people politically affirms its existence through its organized solidarity with its hard kernel. It can therefore only exist in the strategic ambit of abolishing the existing state, precisely because the latter insists that to recognize the existence of such a people is absolutely impossible.

'People' is therefore a political category of communism, whether upstream of the existence of a desired state, whose existence power prohibits, or downstream of an established state whose disappearance

is demanded by a new people, at once internal and external to the official people.

The word 'people', at bottom, has a positive sense only with respect to the possible inexistence of a state: be it a barred state that one wishes to create, or an official state that one wishes to destroy. 'People' is a word that draws all of its value either through the transitory forms of wars of national liberation, or through the definitive forms of communist politics, which have always taken as a strategic norm what they call the 'withering away of the state'.

Have these verbal exercises taken us far afield from Greece and the concrete urgency of the situation? Perhaps. However, a politics [*une politique*] is always the encounter between the discipline of ideas and the surprise of circumstances. It is an immediate power, but also the institution of a duration.

My wish is for Greece to be, for us all, the universal site of such an encounter.

**Translated by Olivia Lucca Fraser**

## Note

1. See Costas Douzinas, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2013.

