

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)

Anti-Copyright



The Anarchist Hypothesis, or Badiou, Žižek, and the Anti-Anarchist Prejudice

Gabriel Kuhn

August 2011

Gabriel Kuhn

The Anarchist Hypothesis, or Badiou, Žižek, and the
Anti-Anarchist Prejudice
August 2011

Retrieved on 15th February 2021 from
www.alpineanarchist.org

This essay was written in the summer of 2011 after Slavoj Žižek sported a Lenin T-shirt during his talk with Amy Goodman and Julian Assange in London. The talk was held on July 2, 2011, and hosted by the Frontline Club.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

Alain Badiou's "Communist Hypothesis" rests on a simple, yet important conviction: we need to be able to envision something other than capitalism and the notion of communism makes this possible. Badiou's understanding of communism, however, remains rather vague. He calls it "an Idea with a regulatory function, rather than a programme".¹ Just like his friend and communist ally, Slavoj Žižek, Badiou considers the twentieth-century attempts to implement communism a fiasco. While Badiou speaks somewhat long-windedly of "the apparent, and sometimes bloody, failures of events closely bound up with the communist hypothesis",² Žižek corrects the BBC's HARDtalk presenter Stephen Sackur who calls communism a "catastrophic failure" only to call it a "total

¹ Alain Badiou, "The Communist Hypothesis", *The New Left Review* 49, January-February 2008.

² Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, London/New York 2010, p. 7.

failure”.³ Yet both Badiou and Žižek are the main stars of a series of popular communism conferences that kicked off with a 2009 event in London, based, in Badiou’s words, on the conviction that “the word ‘communism’ can and must now acquire a positive value once more”.⁴

With the exception of the individualistic, primitivist, and anti-leftist strains of contemporary anarchism, most anarchists – and not only self-declared “anarchist communists” – would support this. “Communism” as the idea of a society based on equal rights, social justice, and solidarity rather than competition is close to most anarchists’ hearts. Badiou’s vision seems particularly attractive to anarchists since he questions both the party and the state. He contends: “The existence of a coercive state, separate from civil society, will no longer appear a necessity: a long process of reorganization based on a free association of producers will see it withering away.”⁵ And: “...the statist principle in itself proved corrupt and, in the long run, ineffective.”⁶ When Badiou argues that “we have to take up the challenge of thinking politics outside of its subjection to the state and outside of the framework of parties or of the party”,⁷ Benjamin Noys is right in pointing out that “anarchists might well reply this has been exactly what anarchism has been doing for at least two hundred years”.⁸ Yet anarchism seems far from anything Badiou, or Žižek, would be interested in.

Badiou’s few flippant remarks on anarchism in the “Communist Hypothesis” peak in the following comment:

“We know today that all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party, or

³ Slavoj Žižek on HARDtalk, BBC, November 24, 2009.

⁴ Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, p. 37.

⁵ Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis”.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, London/New York 2006, p. 270.

⁸ Benjamin Noys, “Through a Glass Darkly: Alain Badiou’s Critique of Anarchism”, *Anarchist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2008.

“the politics that dare not speak its name”.²⁸ Of course there are plenty of reasons why people would want to rid themselves of all political traditions and introduce a new term for their revolutionary politics. I am in no way opposed to this. However, as long as we see no promising new name emerging, we might as well give anarchism a try. There is little to lose.

²⁸ Noys, “Through a Glass Darkly: Alain Badiou’s Critique of Anarchism”.

It would be too easy to simply dismiss these reflections. At the same time, they are hardly new. Noam Chomsky has long been causing outrage among anarchists with statements like the following:

“Many anarchists just consider the state the fundamental form of oppression. I think that’s a mistake. Among the various kinds of oppressive institutions that exist, the state is among the least of them. The state, at least to the extent the society is democratic [...] you have some influence on what happens. [...] You have no influence on what happens in a corporation. They are real tyrannies. As long as society is largely dominated by private tyrannies, which is the worst form of oppression, people just need some form of self-defence. And the state provides some form of self-defence.”²⁷

In the Scandinavian context, we are facing the irony that the activities of many self-declared anarchists have focused on the defence of the social welfare state in recent years. However, this only goes to show that Žižek’s arguments are not necessarily arguments against anarchism, only against the immediate and universal abolition of the state – which not all anarchists would argue for, especially not as long as the state might be replaced by Social Darwinism rather than egalitarian communities. Still, it does not seem necessary to call for a “large state” – the state can be small, it must just focus on social justice rather than on protecting the ruling class’s riches.

The eventual anarchist – and communist – aim, of course, remains to overcome the state. This, however, can only happen by a strong collective movement unified by a common name. Therefore I find it unfortunate that anarchism is still very often

²⁷ *Theory and Practice: Conversations with Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn*, DVD, Oakland 2010.

of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics ‘without party’, and yet at the same time without lapsing into the figure of anarchism, which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties...”⁹

This characterization of anarchism is simply false. In many countries, there were lively anarchist movements long before communist parties emerged. Also ideologically, the common conception of anarchism as communism’s “little brother” is unfounded. Before the clash between Marxists and Bakuninists at the 1872 Congress of the International Workingmen’s Association, Marxism and anarchism had developed as two rather independent strains within the socialist movement.

Žižek’s most notorious evaluation of anarchism stems from a 2002 interview with Doug Henwood (who unfortunately celebrates Žižek as someone who doesn’t care about “political correctness”, echoing tiresome conservative tirades about the apparent limit to freedom that a demand for ethical standards in social relationships entails – that some of these efforts miss the mark does not discredit the principle):

“For me, the tragedy of anarchism is that you end up having an authoritarian secret society trying to achieve anarchist goals. [...] I have contacts in England, France, Germany, and more – and all the time, beneath the mask of this consensus, there was one person accepted by some unwritten rules as the secret master. The totalitarianism was absolute in the sense that people pretended that they were equal, but they all obeyed him.”¹⁰

⁹ Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, p. 155.

¹⁰ “I am a Fighting Atheist: Interview with Slavoj Žižek”, *Bad Subjects*, issue 59, February 2002.

I do not dare to comment on the situation in England and France, but as far as Germany is concerned, I would love to know who this “secret master” within the anarchist movement is. Maybe Žižek does have friends who hold sway over secretive anarchist sects – and maybe it wouldn’t be surprising if Žižek had friends like that – but I can guarantee that they play no role whatsoever in the German anarchist movement, let alone have any major influence on it.

Žižek also claims: “The second point is that I have problems with how anarchism is appropriate to today’s problems. I think if anything, we need more global organization. I think that the left should disrupt this equation that more global organization means more totalitarian control.”¹¹

Since when does anarchism equal a rejection of global organization? While anarchists have been involved in what was once called the “antiglobalization” movement, anarchists were also the first to point out that globalization per se wasn’t the target but rather “corporate” or “neoliberal” globalization – alternative terms like “alterglobalization movement” are results of these debates.

Secondly, while some contemporary anarchists might frown at the idea of any kind of organizing – globally or not – it is by no means true that the contemporary anarchist movement as a whole is anti-organizational. In fact, so-called platformism, an anarchist communist movement based on the “Organizational Platform of the General Union of Anarchists” written by Nestor Makhno and his comrades in Paris exile in the 1920s, has seen a strong resurgence in recent years. The Anarkismo network – a true grassroots example of global organizing – is among the strongest anarchist projects of our times. Interestingly, platformists are regularly criticized as “Leninists” by anti-organizational anarchists – maybe there is more in anarchism for Žižek than he thinks. Žižek’s ignorance might of

¹¹ *ibid.*

too, circle-A logos draw attention to consumer goods from lollypops to handbags, and anarchist bookfairs hardly raise an eyebrow among local officials and the police. However, the stronger presence of anarchists in social movements does make a difference. Žižek seems to prefer the Marxism conferences of the Socialist Workers Party – at least a true reflection of his writing on social movements.

One might of course argue that anarchists got it all wrong and that their influence on social movements does more damage than good. Žižek makes some important points in this regard:

“I’m becoming skeptical of the Leftist anti-State logic. It will not go unnoticed that this discourse finds an echo on the Right as well. Moreover, I don’t see any signs of the so-called ‘disappearance of the State’. To the contrary. And to take the United States as an example, I have to confess that 80 percent of the time, when there is a conflict between civil society and the State, I am on the side of the State. Most of the time, the State must intervene when some local right-wing groups want to ban the teaching of evolution in schools, and so on. I think it’s very important, then, for the Left to influence and use, and perhaps even seize, when possible, State apparatuses. This is not sufficient unto itself, of course. In fact, I think we need to oppose the language of ‘ligne de fuite’ and self-organization and so on with something that is completely taboo on the Left today – like garlic for the vampire – namely, the idea of large State or even larger collective decisions.”²⁶

²⁶ “Divine Violence and Liberated Territories: Soft Targets talks with Slavoj Žižek”, March 14, 2007, www.softtargetsjournal.com/web/Žižek.php

identifies the following key aspects: “Meet me in the streets. Talk openly and reflectively about self-interest. Talk with students about institutional constraints. Resist ideological rigidity. Write, publish, and discuss outside of the Academy. Do not pull punches.”²⁵

Arguably, academic Marxism often leaves these requirements unfulfilled. There exists a privileged class of Marxist academics, a fact that does not contribute to a more positive image of Marxism, and hence communism, in the public eye. At the same time, it allows Marxist intellectuals to be embraced by people who like to surround themselves with intellectuals, Marxist or not. Many folks celebrate Badiou and Žižek not because they are interested in “the subjectivation of an interplay between the singularity of a truth procedure and a representation of history” or in a Lacanian analysis of Disney movies, but because Badiou and Žižek are hip. The two are embraced in the same way as Red Army Faction art exhibitions and Soviet vintage stores. “Communism” has gained exchange value because its actual power has waned. It has turned from threatening to kinky. It is telling that the *New Republic*’s description of Žižek as the “most dangerous philosopher in the West” has caused him no harm at all; rather, it has boosted the Žižek trademark. Radical-chic danger is very different from actual danger. Already in 1994, the noise rock band Killdozer had widespread success with the album *Uncompromising War on Art Under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, full with social realist art clippings and old-school communist slogans. Today, Žižek even gains popularity with numerous Stalin references, while Badiou has been sticking to Mao for a good fifty years.

Of course, anarchism has also turned into a commodity in many ways and is not necessarily perceived as a danger either. Chomsky was allowed to talk politics on HARDtalk

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 183–188.

course stem from the simple fact that in order to truly understand social movements one has to listen. As David Graeber has justly asked, “Could we really imagine someone like Žižek, even in his fantasies, patiently listening to the demands of the directly democratic assemblies of El Alto?”¹²

Given the intellectual weight that both Badiou and Žižek build their reputation on, the shallowness of their critique of anarchism is curious. It seems based on little else but old anti-anarchist prejudices within Marxist thought. Badiou’s above-cited comment is the characteristic assessment of someone who has once learned that anarchism was a petty-bourgeois ideology and never bothered to take a second look. Marxism has long regarded anarchism as a utopian movement with no substantial theory. It is true that anarchism has no Marx and no comparable economic analysis. However, this does not mean that anarchist theory is poor – it is rather poorly known. Unlike Marxist theory with one hundred years of partly state-sponsored development (even if some might call that part stagnation) and a well-established class of academics, anarchist theory has, to a large degree, been formed outside of the academy, in collective reflection on the social struggles and projects one concretely engages in. Examples reach from early twentieth-century anarchosyndicalist study circles and the Modern School Movement to anarchist zine culture and the CrimethInc. project. As a result, anarchist theory is often more tangible, adaptable, and inspiring than Marxist theory, even if it lacks the unpronounceable words and abstract musings. Most importantly, anarchists have shown insights in the dynamics of power, authority, and the state that Marxists could have certainly benefited from. Even Badiou makes concessions like the following:

“Marxism, the workers’ movement, mass democracy, Leninism, the party of the proletariat, the so-

¹² David Graeber, “Referendum on Žižek?”, open letter, December 2007.

cialist state – all the inventions of the 20th century – are not really useful to us any more. At the theoretical level they certainly deserve further study and consideration; but at the level of practical politics they have become unworkable.”¹³

In 1871, Mikhail Bakunin wrote in *God and the State*:

“It is the characteristic of privilege and of every privileged position to kill the mind and heart of men. The privileged man, whether politically or economically, is a man depraved in mind and heart. That is a social law which admits of no exception, and is as applicable to entire nations as to classes, corporations, and individuals.”¹⁴

To avoid any misunderstandings: although I believe that many Marxists lack openness in their engagement with anarchism, the intention of this essay is by no means to bash Marxism. Sectarianism is a problem within all camps of the left. My personal sympathies have always been with anarchism rather than with Marxism, but my personal sympathies are not very important. I have never been interested in condemning Marxists and I don't see them as inevitable traitors and backstabbers of anarchists. Sometimes, Marxists are allies of anarchists, sometimes they are not. The same is true for Christians, peasants, and bus drivers. Of course, history knows of a number of incidents in which Marxists have betrayed anarchists. But anarchists have betrayed anarchists, too. What is important is to have a common goal, namely the abolition of the state system, and solidarity in struggle.

Let us return to Bakunin. Certainly, he is no historical figure that Badiou or Žižek would embrace. Badiou and Žižek seem

¹³ Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis”.

¹⁴ Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State*, Mineola, NY 1970, p. 31.

Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations, Collective Theorization (AK Press, 2007) and *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchism in the Academy* (Routledge, 2009), and conferences like the annual Renewing the Anarchist Tradition (RAT), organized by the Institute for Anarchist Studies, all contribute to bridging the gap. While these anarchist forays into academic discourse are to be welcomed as invigorations of academic debate, they can become insincere if not accompanied by a thorough critique of the institution and of one's own role in it. As Deric Shannon writes in his excellent contribution to *Contemporary Anarchist Studies*:

“It does no good to ignore the fact that careers are sometimes built out of radical politics in general and anarchism in particular. This is not to suggest that we should resign our jobs (which, after all, do allow us to teach anarchist ideas to a new generation). It is, however, important that we acknowledge our career interests openly and honestly. Again, careerism has infected a number of other liberatory perspectives. If we are to avoid that, it requires open, honest, and more importantly, reflective conversations about self-interest and our work.”²³

Every anarchist academic should also heed Shannon's advice on “resisting the careerism, institutionalization, and domestication that other liberatory perspectives have found part and parcel of their entrance into the Academy.”²⁴ Shannon

²³ Deric Shannon, “As Beautiful as a Brick Through a Bank Window: Anarchy, the Academy, and Resisting Domestication”, in: Randall Amster et al. (eds.), *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchism in the Academy*, Milton Park/New York 2009, p. 185.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 184.

3. Most importantly, anarchist ideas are at the core of most of today's social movements. While Marxist ideas do of course continue to play a role for social movements, their current strongholds appear to be traditional Marxist parties and academia. Autonomous social activists mostly adhere to anarchist principles whether they use the term or not: anti-authoritarianism; horizontal organizing; direct action; democratic decision-making processes. Ten years ago, David Graeber summed up the credo of the "New Anarchists" in *New Left Review* thus: "It is about creating and enacting horizontal networks instead of top-down structures like states, parties or corporations; networks based on principles of decentralized, non-hierarchical consensus democracy."²¹ These core values of early twentieth-century activism remain the same. In 2005, Richard Day offered a comprehensive testimony to these developments in his book *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*. Day's assessments that "an orientation to direct action and the construction of alternatives to state and corporate forms opens up new possibilities for radical social change that cannot be imagined from within existing paradigms" and that this "offers the best chance we have to defend ourselves against, and ultimately render redundant, the neoliberal societies of control", still ring true.²²

Richard Day is among a new generation of anarchist academics challenging Marxist dominance at the universities. Initiatives like the Anarchist Studies Networks that have emerged in the UK and in North America, books such as

²¹ David Graeber, "The New Anarchists", *New Left Review* 13, January-February 2012.

²² Richard J.F. Day, *Gramsci Is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements*, London/Ann Arbor, MI/Toronto 2005, p. 18.

exclusively concerned with historical figures that have held power. People like Robespierre, Lenin, Stalin, Mao. Even contemporary politics are discussed in terms of Sarkozy, Chavez, and Berlusconi rather than of social justice, environmental, or peace movements. (That Žižek doesn't pay much attention to the animal rights movement comes as little surprise given his prediction that vegetarians will turn into "degenerates".¹⁵)

However, the intention of this article is also far from attacking Badiou or Žižek. They make extremely important contributions to radical debate, I am certain that they are genuinely striving for a better world, and it is encouraging to see radical thinkers enter mainstream media. Both seem to be pleasant fellows and the hyperactive Žižek is particularly hard to dislike. Yet, Žižek's sense of humour can be as troubling as both thinkers' fascination with powerful men. One does not have to be "oversensitive", "uptight", or "moralistic" to take issue with constant references to individuals who presided over governments that killed, tortured, and imprisoned millions, especially while talking about "conceiving the idea of communism as a real movement" (Žižek)¹⁶ and "usher[ing] in the third era of the Idea's existence" (Badiou)¹⁷. This also applies to Žižek wanting to send people who spray anti-government slogans in the streets of Ljubljana to the Gulag.¹⁸ I know who these people are. Maybe that's what makes it less funny.

In the course of the heated debate following Žižek's oddly titled ("Resistance Is Surrender") review of Simon Critchley's

¹⁵ *Žižek!*, documentary film, directed by Astra Taylor, USA/Canada 2005.

¹⁶ "The Idea of Communism", panel discussion at Marxism 2010, London, July 4, 2010.

¹⁷ Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, p. 260.

¹⁸ *Žižek!*, documentary film.

Infinitely Demanding in the *London Review of Books*,¹⁹ Critchley did not hold back in his critique of Žižek:

“As Carl Schmitt reminds us — and we should not forget that this fascist jurist was a great admirer of Lenin’s — there are two main traditions of non-parliamentary, non-liberal left: authoritarianism and anarchism. If Žižek attacks me with characteristically Leninist violence for belonging to the latter, it is equally clear which faction he supports. [...] For Žižek, all of this is irrelevant; these forms of resistance [civil-society groups, indigenous-rights movements, alternative-globalization and antiwar movements] are simply surrender. He betrays a nostalgia, which is macho and finally manneristic, for dictatorship, political violence, and ruthlessness.”²⁰

With all the sympathy I have for Žižek, it is hard to defend him against such allegations.

However, let us return to the argument that we need a term keeping the idea of something beyond capitalism alive. I wholeheartedly agree with this, although, in postmodern times, the objections are obvious: a “fixed” term fosters identity politics, washes over differences, demands hegemony, and limits tactical options. I understand these objections and good arguments can be made for them. However, a “diverse” threat can also fast become a “diffuse”, and hence very “weak”, threat. The principle of “divide and conquer” is still a cornerstone of authoritarian politics. Furthermore, it is not enough to say that a specific struggle is linked to hundreds of other struggles – it actually *has* to be linked to them. And if these concrete links

¹⁹ Slavoj Žižek, “Resistance Is Surrender”, *London Review of Books*, no. 22, vol. 29, November 15, 2007.

²⁰ Simon Critchley, “Resistance Is Utile”, *Harper’s Review*, May 2008.

exist, then why not call this network of struggles by a common name? A common name has two advantages that are mandatory for mass politics: people feel part of a common struggle and they are able to put collective pressure on the enemy. If you have no common name, you have no common movement, at least not in the public’s eye – but to be in the public’s eye is essential if you want to foster a critical mass that actually makes structural change possible.

The question raised here is whether the name “anarchism” would not be a more promising name than the name “communism”. This is a strategic question. To favour the name “anarchism” doesn’t necessarily mean that you find something wrong with the name “communism”. In fact, you might believe that true communism equals true anarchism. However, I do believe that the name “anarchism” has advantages over the name “communism” as a signifier for the “other” of capitalism. Especially today, when the vast majority of people, just like Badiou and Žižek, associate “communism” with the Marxist tradition rather than with the anarchist.

1. Perhaps the most obvious: anarchism has no history of totalitarianism, Gulag systems, and mass executions.
2. Anarchism is not centred on the ideas of “big men”. This is not to say that anarchism doesn’t have problems with male dominance. These problems are very real. But the “big men” of anarchism (Bakunin, Kropotkin, etc.) have far less influence on contemporary anarchism than their Marxist counterparts. It is hard to be taken seriously as a Marxist if you have not studied Marx, Lenin, and Mao. Meanwhile, many contemporary anarchists have never even picked up a book by Bakunin, Kropotkin, or Malatesta. In fact, sometimes one might wish for a bit more historical interest and study. Overall, though, the lack of reverence is productive and contributes to anarchism’s vibrancy.