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After Communism

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> A postmodern capitalism will necessarily call to life a postmodern Marxism, which will combat it.
>
> —Fredric Jameson, "Actually Existing Marxism," in *Marxism beyond Marxism*

I would like to dedicate these reflections to the memory of Carol Kay, whose personal and political example is somehow implicated in them. One of the things that could be said to define postmodernity as such is the disappearance of the communist alternative to capitalism. Would it be possible, however, to reimagine communism not only in the context of postmodernity but also in some sense *from* postmodernity? The question seems at once perverse and quixotic. Perverse, because of everything we know about the Gulag, the crimes of Stalin and all the little Stalins, the killing fields of Cambodia, the constant stifling of free expression and initiative even under conditions of what was termed "socialist normality." Quixotic, because of the simple, inescapable fact of the historical failure of a system that justified **[End Page 39]** those crimes and that repression in the name of building a more just and democratic human future.

But if the collapse of the Soviet Union and the parties related to it has reduced communism today to a mere theoretical possibility, communism remains, nevertheless, a theoretical *possibility*. What is at stake in that possibility is trying to think beyond the limits of both neoliberal hegemony and the new forms of "actually existing" social democracy represented by something like Anthony Giddens's idea of the Third Way or Richard Rorty's

neo-Fabianism in *Achieving Our Country*.

Most of us would agree that the regimes that have emerged as a result of the collapse of communism have been a very mixed bag, especially in the cases of the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. This has provoked both within and outside the postcommunist world a nostalgia for what now appears like a golden age of post–World War II Stalinism, not unlike the nostalgia for the '50s in U.S. middle-class culture. But the simple restoration of regimes of a Stalinist type, or the implantation of new ones—even if this were still in fact possible—would simply lead in time to the same impasse the socialist bloc experienced in the 1980s. This is because the seeds of that impasse were present in the very form of economic, political, and cultural centralization and modernization practiced by the regimes dominated by communist parties, regimes we may now recognize as a peculiar form of bourgeois dictatorship.

There are many good reasons to oppose the U.S. blockade of Cuba or to think that the Chinese model of economic transition is superior to the Russian one. But no one—and especially not the Cubans or the Chinese—is going to claim that Cuba or China today are models of a new type of postcapitalist society (indeed, this loss of socialist normativity is precisely what the Cuban concept of "special period in times of emergency" expresses). Instead, the strategic projection of the regimes in both Cuba and China is to use the party's monopoly of political and bureaucratic power to facilitate integration into capitalist globalization without the sort of meltdown that the Soviet Union experienced.

Something similar, paradoxically, happens with the contemporary variants of democratic socialism or social democracy, from Nelson Mandela's African National Congress in South Africa to Tony Blair's New Labour in Britain, Gerhard Schröder's Social Democratic Party in Germany, or, mutatis mutandis, Democratic Socialists of America in the United States (I should indicate that my own direct political affiliation has been with this tradition). Like Bill Clinton, who is to some extent their model, they represent the **[End Page 40]** reconfiguration of the various forms of the historical Left into what the late Michael Harrington called "the left wing of the possible." But that reconfiguration consists, in the end, in accepting the actual hegemony of globalized capital. They propose not an alternative to that hegemony but rather more progressive ways of designing national or regional policy in relation to globalization. They do not have a vision of radically other forms of community, value, production, democracy—that is, of the possibility of another mode of production. They reproduce the traditional function of social democracy of adjusting blue and white collar working-class and popular-sector demands to the requirements of capital and vice versa. As the recent NATO-led attack on Serbia suggests, they are also unable to detach themselves from the logic of imperialism in its contemporary form.

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We know that the projects of both historical communism and social democracy were

subordinate in many ways to the project of modernity. Indeed, the argument between capitalism and communism that defined the cold war was essentially an argument about which of the two could best carry forward the possibility of a political, scientific, cultural, and economic modernity latent in the bourgeois project itself. The basic premise of Marxism as a modernizing ideology was that bourgeois society could not complete its own promise of emancipation and material well-being given the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production, contradictions above all between the social character of the forces of production and the private character of ownership and capital accumulation. Freeing the forces of production from the fetters of capitalist relations of production—so the familiar argument went—the state socialist or quasi-socialist regimes inspired by the Soviet model would soon overcome these limitations, inaugurating an era of unprecedented economic growth, which in turn would be the material precondition for socialism and eventually the transition to communism. The—ultimately triumphant—response of capitalism was that the force of the free market would be more dynamic and efficient in the long run in producing modernity and economic growth.

What was not in question on either side of this argument was the desirability of modernity as such and the idea of a teleological historical process—involving "stages" of one sort or another—necessary to attain that modernity. Modernity implies the possibility of a society that is transparent to itself. This is what Habermas's concept of communicative rationality **[End Page 41]** expresses. What opposes transparency or the universalization of communicative rationality, however, is not only the conflict of tradition and modernity—that is, the "incompleteness" of modernity, to borrow Habermas's own term—but also the proliferation of forms of social heterogeneity produced in part by the very historical process of capitalist modernity, involving as it does colonization, racism, slavery, demographic catastrophe, mass migrations, combined and uneven development, boom and bust cycles, the reproduction of male privilege, and so on. We can agree to call this heterogeneity (which represents different logics of the social and different modes of experiencing and conceptualizing history and value within a given social formation or nation-state) multiculturalism.

It is no secret that multiculturalism and the corresponding practices of the new social movements can appear as coincident with neoliberal hegemony. This is a key theme in the critique of multiculturalism from the Left, expressed most articulately in Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*. Implicit in this paradox is the greatest challenge neoliberalism poses to the Left: the fact that, in principle, neoliberal theory (and here it would be important to make a distinction between neoliberalism and neoconservatism) does not presuppose any hierarchy of value apart from that expressed in individual market choice. If, in turn, market choice is seen as essentially rational and "free"—that is, not subject to external normative constraints—then, in a sense, Habermas's communicative rationality is already implicit in globalization, and, with the extension of the principle of the market and parliamentary democracy to all social spaces, we are, for all practical purposes, indeed at the end of history.

The problem is compounded by the theoretical representation of multiculturalism and cultural agency under conditions of globalization in cultural studies and new social movement theory. In both, global/national (or to use Néstor García Canclini's term, "glocal") civil society is seen as the place where multicultural heterogeneity or hybridity appears, as against the supposedly monological and homogenizing discourses of the nation-state. Paradoxically, however, in making this identification between cultural heterogeneity and civil society—an identification that seeks to displace hermeneutic authority from elite culture to popular reception—cultural studies and new social movement theory end up legitimizing in some ways the market and globalization. The very logic of heterogeneity and hybridity they seek to represent points in the direction of assuming that hegemony is no longer a possibility because there no longer exists a common cultural basis for forming the collective national-popular subject required to exercise hegemony. **[End Page 42]** There are only de-territorialized identities or identities in the process of becoming de-territorialized. In the manner of Foucault, power is seen as disseminated in all social spaces instead of being concentrated in the state and the state ideological apparatus. Even though it sometimes claims to embrace postmodernism, the project of cultural studies in particular runs the risk of simply transferring the dynamic of modernization and transculturation from the sphere of bourgeois high culture to mass culture, which is now seen as more capable of producing new forms of "cultural citizenship." In this sense, cultural studies and the new theories of social agency do not break with the values of modernity and do not, in themselves, point beyond the limits of neoliberal hegemony.

Would it be possible to derive from multiculturalism more radical consequences, given that what is expressed in the various forms of identity politics that emerge from it are relations of subordination and marginalization produced by the character of capitalist development itself? This question might be seen as a variation of the question we started with: Is it possible to imagine an idea of communism that is not tied to a telos of modernity/modernization—that is, a "postmodernist" form of communism? If multiculturalism is essentially a demand for equality of opportunity—in accord with the legal category of the subject and the principle of individual rights—then it is not only compatible with neoliberal hegemony but also requires, in a sense, the market and liberal democracy to constitute itself as such. In turn, the logic of both capitalist states and market functions is to organize hybrid or heterogeneous populations into fixed identity categories: poor, black, gay, indigenous, Latino, woman, AIDS victim, Catholic, and so on (part of the problem with identity politics is, of course, that one person can be all these things at once).

But if the demand is not so much for formal equality—the "level playing field"—as for *actual* epistemological, cultural, economic, and civic-political equality and self-realization, such that cultural difference (say, the fact of having Spanish as a primary language in the United States) does not imply a limitation on citizenship, then the logic of multiculturalism will necessarily have to question the rule of capital. To paraphrase what I take to be Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's central argument in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*,

multiculturalism conforms to liberal pluralism because the identities in play in multiculturalism find in themselves, rather than in a transcendental social principle or goal, the principle of their validity and rationality. On the other hand, to the extent that the autoconstitution of multicultural identities is tied to forms of subalternity produced by both capitalist **[End Page 43]** and precapitalist forms of inequality and exploitation untransformed or reinforced by modernity, the identity claims participate in a common "egalitarian imaginary"—as Laclau and Mouffe call it—that is potentially anticapitalist. What fuels identity politics, in other words, is hatred and negation of social inequality and discrimination as such. This makes it possible to produce from identity politics not only serialized interest-group politics but also what Laclau and Mouffe call a "popular subject position"—that is, a position that would tend to divide the political space into two antagonistic blocs: the bloc of "the people" and the bloc of the elite or ruling class.

The idea inherent in this argument is that one can derive the possibility of communism from the principle of multiculturalism. I imagine the political form of this possibility as something like a postmodernist reincarnation of the Popular Front—the idea (perhaps more than the reality) of the Rainbow Coalition or the Brazilian PT (Workers' Party) are two models that come to mind. Such movements seek to interpellate "the people" as a bloc but not as a unitary, homogeneously "modern" *subject*—the subject of Habermas's "communicative rationality" or "rational choice Marxism," or Rorty's neo-Fabian utilitarian subject. Rather, "the people" is itself self-constituted as internally fissured, heterogeneous, multiple, somewhat on the order of what Paolo Virno understands by "the multitude" or what Jean François Lyotard understands by "the pagan." The people-multitude, as opposed to the people-as-one of populist modernity, would be the political-cultural expression of the egalitarian imaginary inherent in multicultural heterogeneity. This means that the people is "essentially" multicultural (in the way that Gayatri Spivak speaks of the "strategic essentialism" of feminism or subaltern studies historiography): That is, multiculturalism is a necessary rather than a contingent aspect of the identity of the people as such. It does not mean, however, generalizing the principle of heterogeneity to the whole social space, such that existing economic, racial, ethnic, class, and gender inequalities are themselves manifestations of a heterogeneity that fits with the logic of market liberalism ("different strokes for different folks") and the operations of civil society. Rather, the possibility of heterogeneity is articulated as *internal* to the bloc of the people, which in turn has to be posed against that which it is not, a constitutive outside. That outside would have to be the logic of acculturation or transculturation of capitalist modernity (and the homogeneity requirement of the capitalist nation-state) and the law of value itself, seen in the last instance as incompatible with the character of the recognition/redistribution claims of both class and multicultural identity politics. **[End Page 44]**

To put this another way, the unity and mutual reciprocity of the elements of the people depend (as the Rainbow Coalition meant to symbolize) on a recognition of sociocultural difference and incommensurability—a recognition, that is, of "contradictions among the

people” (Mao). Communism would then be the social form of this difference and incommensurability, without resolving them into a transcendent or unitary cultural or political logic.

Some final, perhaps overlapping, observations:

1. In the problematic Laclau and Mouffe elaborate, the possibility of multiculturalism can point either in the direction of the proliferation of “democratic subject positions” of an advanced liberalism or in the direction of the “popular subject position” of a potentially counterhegemonic historical bloc. But it should be immediately evident that what is operative in *both* political alternatives is essentially the *same* social-cultural logic. This argues for a convergence or tactical alliance between the forms of advanced liberalism (for example, liberal feminist and postcolonial theory, or critical legal theory) and the project of reimagining communism, a convergence that would pass beyond in some ways the limits expressed in current social democratic or New Democrat politics.

2. If one of the characteristics of the poststructuralist intervention has been the overdetermination of class identity by other identities, by the same token it is necessary to insist in turn on the overdetermination of those identities by class identity. But this is also to ask how class itself functions as an “identity” rather than as an abstract relation of production that assumes that political-cultural agency flows from that positioning.

3. Fredric Jameson and others have argued the “systematic incompatibility” between the principle of the market and socialism, noting the enormous destructive force—both economic and cultural-ideological—of the reintroduction of capitalist market relations in postcommunist societies such as Russia. But the recognition of the relation between the market and democratization in the neoliberal critique of state planning or control does not imply necessarily an identification of markets with capitalism or, for that matter, of markets as such with the “free market.” That identification depends, rather, on the ideological function of neoliberalism to assure the hegemony of global capital, since markets are not practices exclusive to capitalism and market relations as such do not define capitalism (there can be modes of production that depend on markets but that are not capitalist, as in the case of petty commodity production, and, by the same token, there can be social regimes of class exploitation—for example, feudalism—that do not depend on the market). The question is not whether markets are **[End Page 45]** better than state or communal planning, but rather whose class and group interests and values are hegemonic in the operations of both the state and the economy—that is, it is a *political* and *cultural* question. State ownership of the means of production does not in itself imply noncapitalist

relations of production.

4. The argument developed in postcolonial and subaltern studies about the incommensurability of what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls the “radical heterogeneity” of the subaltern and the modern nation-state has coincided with the effective weakening and de-territorialization of the nation-state by capitalist globalization. Nevertheless, the space of hegemony in political-legal and cultural terms is still the nation-state (or, if you prefer, hegemony still has to pass at some point or other through the nation-state). It would be necessary, therefore, to develop a *new concept* of the nation, of “national” territoriality, identity, and interests, of the national-popular—one in which instead of “the many becoming one,” the one would become many. We need to move, in other words, from *utopia* to *heterotopia*.

5. For reasons that will be obvious, the project of reimagining communism will have to be, for the time being, more a project in the field of “culture” than in the sphere of practical politics or economics. But one of the characteristics of postmodernity is precisely the breakdown of what José Joaquín Brunner has usefully called “the ‘cultural’ conception of culture”—the concept that identifies culture essentially with the academic humanities or the Sunday supplement of the newspaper. However, the new centrality of culture in globalization also marks a new sense of limit, a limit that concerns our own role and responsibility as intellectuals. If, to gain hegemony or social equality, subaltern classes or groups have to become like that which is already hegemonic—that is, “modern” bourgeois culture—then that culture and that class will continue to win, even after they have been defeated politically. This paradox defines the crisis of the project of communism in this century. It means, therefore, that the task of reimagining communism will require not only a radically new political imaginary but, at the same time, a critique of the forms of academic knowledge as we practice them, that is, of our own complicity in producing and reproducing relations of social and cultural inequality.

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