

THE IDEA OF COMMUNISM



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Such a distorted history, in my opinion, would amount to little more than a rationalization of the defeats suffered in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Ever since the revolutionary upheavals in late eighteenth-century France and Haiti, the history of the modern world has been shaped above all by the determination of our ruling classes to pacify the people they rule. As Michel Foucault demonstrated in convincing detail, a wide range of counter-revolutionary strategies for criminalizing, dividing and then dissolving the will of the people – for restoring the people to their ‘normal’ condition as a dispersed and passive flock – were hastily developed during and after the French Revolution; in a useful intervention Naomi Klein has recently shown how, in the last couple of decades, similar strategies have been deployed at new levels of intensity and ferocity.⁶⁶ The result, so far, has been the preservation of popular passivity and deference on a confounding scale.

In the late 1940s Beauvoir already bemoaned our tendency to ‘think that we are not the master of our destiny; we no longer hope to help make history, we are resigned to submitting to it’.⁶⁷ By the late 1970s such complaint, revalorized as celebration, had become the stuff of a growing consensus. This consensus has now been dominant, in both politics and philosophy, for more than thirty disastrous years. It’s time to leave it behind.

66 Cf. Foucault, *Psychiatric Power*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2006). In her *Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), drawing on the paradigm illustrated by Ewen Cameron’s notorious psychiatric experiments at the McGill University in the 1950s, Naomi Klein shows how ‘disaster capitalists’ systematically make use of natural disasters, military assault and psychological warfare in order to ‘soften up’ popular resistance to newly intense forms of exploitation or oppression. ‘Shock’ serves to isolate and disorientate people, paralysing their will and capacity to defend their own most essential interests.

67 Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 139.

8 The Common in Communism

Michael Hardt

The economic and financial crisis that exploded in Fall 2008 resulted in an extraordinarily rapid sea-change in the realm of political imaginaries. Just as a few years ago talk of climate change was ridiculed and dismissed in the mainstream media as exaggerated and apocalyptic, but then almost from one day to the next the fact of climate change became the nearly universal common sense, so too the economic and financial crisis has rearranged the dominant views of capitalism and socialism. Until very recently, any critique of neo-liberal strategies of deregulation, privatization and the reduction of welfare structures – let alone of capital itself – was cast in the dominant media as crazy talk. Today, *Newsweek* proclaims on its cover, with only partial irony, ‘We are all socialists now.’ The rule of capital is suddenly open to question, from Left and Right, and some form of socialist or Keynesian state regulation and management seems inevitable.

We need to look, however, outside this alternative. Too often it appears as though our only choices are capitalism or socialism, the rule of private property or that of public property, such that the only cure for the ills of state control is to privatize and for the ills of capital to publicize, that is, exert state regulation. We need to explore another possibility: neither the private property of capitalism nor the public property of socialism but the common in communism.

Many central concepts of our political vocabulary, including communism as well as democracy and freedom, have been so corrupted that they are almost unusable. In standard usage, in fact, communism has come to mean its opposite, that is, total state control of economic and social life. We could abandon these terms and invent new ones, of course, but we would leave behind too the long history of struggles, dreams and aspirations that are tied to them. I think it is better to fight over the concepts themselves in order to restore or renew their meaning. In the case of communism, this requires an analysis of the forms of political organization that are possible

today and, before that, an investigation of the nature of contemporary economic and social production. I will limit myself in this essay to the preliminary task of the critique of political economy.

One of the reasons that the communist hypotheses of previous eras are no longer valid is that the composition of capital – as well as the conditions and products of capitalist production – have altered. Most importantly, the technical composition of labour has changed. How do people produce both inside and outside the workplace? What do they produce and under what conditions? How is productive cooperation organized? And what are the divisions of labour and power that separate them along gender and racial lines and in the local, regional and global contexts? In addition to investigating the current composition of labour, we also have to analyse the relations of property under which labour produces. Along with Marx we can say that the critique of political economy is, at its heart, a critique of property. 'The theory of the Communists', Marx and Engels write in the *Manifesto*, 'may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.'¹

In order to explore the relationship and struggle between property and the common, which I consider to be central to communist analysis and proposition, I want to read two passages from Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. By referring the *Manuscripts* I do not intend to pose the early Marx against the late, to celebrate Marx's humanism, or anything of the sort. These are arguments, in fact, that continue throughout Marx's work. Nor is it necessary to appeal to the master to renew the concept of communism. The *Manuscripts* provide an occasion for reading the common in communism, which is increasingly relevant today, but also for measuring the distance between Marx's time and our own.

In the first passage, titled 'The Relation of Private Property', Marx proposes a periodization that highlights the dominant form of property in each era. By the mid nineteenth century, he claims, European societies are no longer primarily dominated by immobile property, such as land, but instead by mobile forms of property, generally the results of industrial production. The period of transition is characterized by a bitter battle between the two forms of property. In typical fashion Marx mocks the claims to social good made by owners of both types of property. The land-owner emphasizes the productivity of agriculture and its vital importance for society as well as 'the noble lineage of his property, the feudal

1 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 52.

reminiscences, the poetry of remembrance, his high-flown nature, his political importance, etc.'² The owner of movable property, in contrast, attacks the parochialism and stasis of the world of immobile property while singing his own praises. 'Movable property itself', Marx writes, 'claims to have won political freedom for the world, to have loosed the chains of civil society, to have linked together different worlds, to have given rise to trade, which encourages friendship between peoples and to have created a pure morality and a pleasing culture.'³ Marx considers it inevitable that mobile property would achieve economic dominance over immobile property.

Movement inevitably triumphs over immobility, open and self-conscious baseness over hidden and unconscious baseness, *greed* over *self-indulgence*, the avowedly restless and versatile self-interest of *enlightenment*, over the parochial, worldly-wise, artless, lazy and deluded *self-interest of superstition*, just as *money* must triumph over the other forms of private property.⁴

Marx, of course, mocks both of these property owners, but he does recognize that movable property, however despicable, does have the advantage of revealing 'the idea of *labour* as the sole *essence of wealth*'.⁵ His periodization, in other words, highlights the increased potential for a communist project.

I want to analyse a parallel struggle between two forms of property today, but before doing that I should note that the triumph of movable over immobile property corresponds to the victory of profit over rent as the dominant mode of expropriation. In the collection of rent, the capitalist is deemed to be relatively external to the process of the production of value, merely extracting value produced by other means. The generation of profit, in contrast, requires the engagement of the capitalist in the production process, imposing forms of cooperation, disciplinary regimes, etc. By the time of John Maynard Keynes, profit has such dignity with respect to rent that Keynes can predict (or prescribe) the 'euthanasia of the rentier' and thus the disappearance of the 'functionless investor' in

2 Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1975), p. 338.

3 Ibid., p. 339.

4 Ibid., p. 340.

5 Ibid., p. 343.

favour of the capitalist investor who organizes and manages production.⁶ This conception of an historical movement within capital from rent to profit also corresponds to the purported passage in many analyses from primitive accumulation to capitalist production proper. Primitive accumulation might be considered, in this context, an absolute rent, expropriating entirely wealth produced elsewhere.

The passages from rent to profit and from the dominance of immobile to that of mobile property are both part of a more general claim by Marx that by the mid nineteenth century large-scale industry has replaced agriculture as the hegemonic form of economic production. He does not make this claim, of course, in quantitative terms. Industrial production at the time made up a small fraction of the economy even in England, the most industrialized country. And the majority of workers toiled not in the factories but in the field. Marx's claim instead is qualitative: all other forms of production will be forced to adopt the qualities of industrial production. Agriculture, mining, even society itself will have to adopt its regimes of mechanization, its labour discipline, its temporalities and rhythms, its working day, and so forth. E. P. Thompson's classic essay on clocks and work-discipline in England is a wonderful demonstration of the progressive imposition of industrial temporality over society as a whole.⁷ In the century and a half since Marx's time, this tendency for industry to impose its qualities has proceeded in extraordinary ways.

Today, however, it is clear that industry no longer holds the hegemonic position within the economy. This is not to say that fewer people work in factories today than ten or twenty or fifty years ago – although, in certain respects, their locations have shifted, moving to the other side of the global divisions of labour and power. The claim, once again, is not primarily quantitative but qualitative. Industry no longer imposes its qualities over other sectors of the economy and over social relations more generally. That seems to me a relatively uncontroversial claim.

More disagreement arises when one proposes another form of production as successor to industry and hegemonic in this way. Toni Negri and I argue that immaterial or biopolitical production is emerging in that hegemonic position. By immaterial and biopolitical we try to grasp together the production of ideas, information, images, knowledges, code, languages,

6 John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: MacMillan, 1936), p. 376.

7 E. P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism', *Past and Present* 38:1 (1967): 56–97.

social relationships, affects and the like. This designates occupations throughout the economy, from the high end to the low, from health-care workers, flight attendants and educators to software programmers and from fast food and call-centre workers to designers and advertisers. Most of these forms of production are not new, of course, but the coherence among them is perhaps more recognizable and, more important, their qualities tend today to be imposed over other sectors of the economy and over society as a whole. Industry has to informationalize; knowledge, code and images are becoming ever more important throughout the traditional sectors of production; and the production of affects and care is becoming increasingly essential in the valorization process. This hypothesis, of a tendency for immaterial or biopolitical production to emerge in the hegemonic position which used to be held by industry, has all kinds of immediate implications for gender divisions of labour and various international and other geographical divisions of labour, but I cannot treat them in this essay.⁸

If we focus on the new struggle between two forms of property implied by this transition we can return to Marx's formulations. Whereas in Marx's time the struggle was between immobile property (such as land) and moveable property (such as material commodities), today the struggle is between material property and immaterial property – or, to put it another way, whereas Marx focused on the mobility of property today the central issue is scarcity and reproducibility, such that the struggle can be posed as being between exclusive versus shared property. The contemporary focus on immaterial and reproducible property in the capitalist economy can be recognized easily from even a cursory glance at the field of property law. Patents, copyrights, indigenous knowledges, genetic codes, the information in the germplasm of seeds, and similar issues are the topics most actively debated in the field. The fact that the logic of scarcity does not hold in this domain poses new problems for property. Just as Marx saw that movement necessarily triumphs over immobility, so too today the immaterial triumphs over the material, the reproducible over the unreproducible, and the shared over the exclusive.

The emerging dominance of this form of property is significant, in part, because it demonstrates and returns to centre stage the conflict between the common and property as such. Ideas, images, knowledges, code, languages and even affects can be privatized and controlled as

8 On immaterial and biopolitical production, see Michael Hardt and Tony Negri, *Commonwealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), Chapter 3.

property, but it is more difficult to police ownership because they are so easily shared or reproduced. There is a constant pressure for such goods to escape the boundaries of property and become common. If you have an idea, sharing it with me does not reduce its utility to you, but usually increases it. In fact, in order to realize their maximum productivity, ideas, images and affects must be common and shared. When they are privatized their productivity reduces dramatically – and, I would add, making the common into public property, that is, subjecting it to state control or management, similarly reduces productivity. Property is becoming a fetter on the capitalist mode of production. Here is an emerging contradiction internal to capital: the more the common is corralled as property, the more its productivity is reduced; and yet expansion of the common undermines the relations of property in a fundamental and general way.

One could say, in rather broad terms, that neo-liberalism has been defined by the battle of private property not only against public property but also and perhaps more importantly against the common. Here it is useful to distinguish between two types of the common, both of which are the object of neo-liberal strategies of capital. (And this can serve as an initial definition of 'the common'.) On the one hand, the common names the earth and all the resources associated with it: the land, the forests, the water, the air, minerals and so forth. This is closely related to seventeenth-century English usage of 'the commons' (with an 's'). On the other hand, the common also refers, as I have already said, to the results of human labour and creativity, such as ideas, language, affects and so forth. You might think of the former as the 'natural' common and the latter as the 'artificial' common, but really such divisions between natural and artificial quickly break down. In any case, neo-liberalism has aimed to privatize both these forms of the common.

One major scene of such privatization has been the extractive industries, providing transnational corporations with access to diamonds in Sierra Leone or oil in Uganda or lithium deposits and water rights in Bolivia. Such neo-liberal privatization of the common has been described by many authors, including David Harvey and Naomi Klein, in terms that mark the renewed importance of primitive accumulation or accumulation by dispossession.⁹

⁹ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007). For an excellent analysis of neo-liberalism's focus on extractive industries in Africa, see James Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

The neo-liberal strategies for the privatization of the 'artificial' common are much more complex and contradictory. Here the conflict between property and the common is fully in play. The more the common is subject to property relations, as I said, the less productive it is; and yet capitalist valorization processes require private accumulation. In many domains, capitalist strategies for privatizing the common through mechanisms such as patents and copyrights continue (often with difficulty) despite the contradictions. The music industry and computer industry are full of examples. This is also the case with so-called biopiracy, that is, the processes whereby transnational corporations expropriate the common in the form of indigenous knowledges or genetic information from plants, animals and humans, usually through the use of patents. Traditional knowledges concerning, for instance, the use of a ground seed as a natural pesticide, or the healing qualities of a particular plant, are turned into private property by the corporation that patents the knowledge. Parenthetically I would insist that piracy is a misnomer for such activities. Pirates have a much more noble vocation: they steal property. These corporations instead steal the common and transform it into property.

In general, though, capital accomplishes the expropriation of the common not through privatization per se but in the form of rent. Several contemporary Italian and French economists working on what they call cognitive capitalism – Carlo Vercellone most prominently – argue that just as in an earlier period there was a tendential movement from rent to profit as the dominant mode of capitalist expropriation, today there is a reverse movement from profit to rent.¹⁰ Patents and copyrights, for example, generate rent in the sense that they guarantee an income based on the ownership of material or immaterial property. This argument does not imply a return to the past: the income generated from a patent, for instance, is very different from that generated from land ownership. The core insight of this analysis of the emerging dominance of rent over profit, which I find very significant, is that capital remains generally external to the processes of the production of the common. Whereas in the case of industrial capital and its generation of profit, the capitalist plays a role internal to the production process, particularly in designating the means of cooperation and imposing the modes of discipline, in the

¹⁰ See, for example, Carlo Vercellone, 'Crisi della legge del valore e divenire rendita del profitto', in Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra (eds), *Crisi dell'economia globale* (Verona: Ombre corte, forthcoming).

production of the common the capitalist must remain relatively external.¹¹ Every intervention of the capitalist in the processes of the production of the common, just as every time the common is made property, reduces productivity. Rent is a mechanism, then, to cope with the conflicts between capital and the common. A limited autonomy is granted the processes of the production of the common with respect to the sharing of resources and the determination of the modes of cooperation, and capital is still able to exert control and expropriate value through rent. Exploitation in this context takes the form of the expropriation of the common.

This discussion of rent points, on the one hand, to the neo-liberal processes of accumulation by dispossession in so far as primitive accumulation can be called a form of absolute rent. On the other hand, it casts in a new light the contemporary predominance of finance, which is characterized by complex and very abstract varieties of relative rent. Christian Marazzi cautions us against conceiving of finance as fictional, in opposition to the 'real economy', a conception that misunderstands the extent to which finance and production are both increasingly dominated by immaterial forms of property. He also warns against dismissing finance as merely unproductive in contrast to an image of productivity roughly tied to industrial production. It is more useful to situate finance in the context of the general trend from profit to rent, and the correspondingly external position of capital with respect to the production of the common. Finance expropriates the common and exerts control at a distance.¹²

Now I can bring to a close and review the primary points of my reading of this first passage from Marx's early manuscripts, in which he describes the struggle between two forms of property (immobile versus moveable) and the historical passage from the dominance of landed property to that of industrial capital. Today we are also experiencing a struggle between two forms of property (material versus immaterial or scarce versus reproducible). And this struggle reveals a deeper conflict between property as such and the common. Although the production of the common is increasingly central to the capitalist economy, capital cannot intervene in the production process and must instead remain external, expropriating value in the form of rent (through financial and other mechanisms). As a result the production and productivity of the common becomes an

11 See Marx's discussion of cooperation in Chapter 13 of *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 439–54.

12 See Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language*, trans. Gregory Conti (New York: Semiotext(e), 2008).

increasingly autonomous domain, still exploited and controlled, of course, but through mechanisms that are relatively external. Like Marx, I would say this development of capital is not good in itself – and the tendential dominance of immaterial or biopolitical production carries with it a series of new and more severe forms of exploitation and control. And yet it is important to recognize that capital's own development provides the tools for liberation from capital, and specifically here it leads to the increased autonomy of the common and its productive circuits.

This brings me to the second passage from the *Manuscripts* that I want to consider, 'Private Property and Communism'. The notion of the common helps us to understand what Marx means by communism in this passage. 'Communism', he writes, 'is the positive expression of the abolition of private property.'¹³ He includes that phrase 'positive expression' in part to differentiate communism from the false or corrupt notions of the concept. Crude communism, he claims, merely perpetuates private property by generalizing it and extending it to the entire community, as universal private property. That term, of course, is an oxymoron: if property is now universal, extended to the entire community, it is no longer really private. He is trying to emphasize, it seems to me, that in crude communism even though the private character has been stripped away, property remains. Communism properly conceived instead is the abolition not only of private property but of property as such. 'Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it.'¹⁴ What would it mean for something to be ours when we do not possess it? What would it mean to regard ourselves and our world not as property? Has private property made us so stupid that we cannot see that? Marx is searching here for the common. The open access and sharing that characterize use of the common are outside of and inimical to property relations. We have been made so stupid that we can only recognize the world as private or public. We have become blind to the common.

Marx does arrive at a version of the common (as the abolition of property) some twenty years later in volume 1 of *Capital*, when he defines communism as the result of capital's negative dialectic.

The capitalist mode of appropriation, the result of the capitalist mode of production, produces capitalist private property. This is the first

13 Marx, *Early Writings*, pp. 345–6.

14 Ibid., p. 351.

negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of the proprietor. But capitalist production begets, with the inexorability of a law of Nature, its own negation. It is the negation of negation. This does not re-establish private property for the producer, but gives him individual property based on the acquisition of the capitalist era: i.e., on co-operation and the possession in common of the land and of the means of production.¹⁵

Capitalist development inevitably results in the increasingly central role of cooperation and the common, which in turn provides the tools for overthrowing the capitalist mode of production and constitutes the bases for an alternative society and mode of production, a communism of the common.

What I find dissatisfying about this passage from *Capital*, though, aside from its dialectical construction, is that the common Marx refers to – ‘co-operation and the possession in common of the land and the means of production’ – grasps primarily the material elements in question, the immobile and moveable forms of property made common. This formulation does not grasp, in other words, the dominant forms of capitalist production today. If we look back at the passage in the early *Manuscripts*, however, and try to filter out Marx’s youthful humanism, we find a definition of communism and the common that does highlight the immaterial or, really, biopolitical aspects. Consider, first, this definition of communism, which Marx proposes after having set aside the crude notion: ‘Communism is the positive supersession of private property as human self-estrangement, and hence the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man; it is the complete restoration of man to himself as a social, i.e. human, being.’¹⁶ What does Marx mean by ‘the true appropriation of the human essence through and for man’? Clearly he is working on the notion of appropriation against the grain, applying it in a context where it now seems strange: no longer appropriation of the object in the form of private property but appropriation of our own subjectivity, our human, social relations. Marx explains this communist appropriation, this non-property appropriation, in terms of the human sensorium and the full range of creative and productive powers. ‘Man appropriates his integral essence in an integral way’, which he explains in terms of ‘all his human relations to the

15 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, p. 929.

16 Marx, *Early Writings*, p. 348.

world – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, contemplating, sensing, wanting, acting, loving’.¹⁷ I think the term ‘appropriation’ here is misleading because Marx is not talking about capturing something that already exists, but rather creating something new. This is the production of subjectivity, the production of a new sensorium – not really appropriation, then, but production. If we return to the text we can see that Marx does, in fact, pose this clearly: ‘Assuming the positive supersession of private property, man produces man, himself and other men’.¹⁸ On this reading Marx’s notion of communism in the early manuscripts is far from humanism, that is, far from any recourse to a pre-existing or eternal human essence. Instead the positive content of communism, which corresponds to the abolition of private property, is the autonomous human production of subjectivity, the human production of humanity – a new seeing, a new hearing, a new thinking, a new loving.

This brings us back to our analysis of the biopolitical turn in the economy. In the context of industrial production, Marx arrived at the important recognition that capitalist production is aimed at creating not only objects but also subjects. ‘Production thus not only creates an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.’¹⁹ In the context of biopolitical production, however, the production of subjectivity is much more direct and intense. Some contemporary economists, in fact, analyse the transformations of capital in terms that echo Marx’s formulation in the early manuscripts. ‘If we had to hazard a guess on the emerging model in the next decades’, posits Robert Boyer, for example, ‘we would probably have to refer to the *production of man by man*.’²⁰ Christian Marazzi similarly understands the current passage in capitalist production as moving towards an ‘anthropogenetic model’. Living beings as fixed capital are at the centre of this transformation and the production of forms of life is becoming the basis of added value. This is a process in which, when put to work, human faculties, competences, knowledges and affects – those acquired on the job but more importantly those accumulated outside work – are directly productive of value.²¹ One distinctive feature of the work of head and heart, then, is that paradoxically the *object* of production

17 Ibid., p. 351.

18 Ibid., p. 349.

19 Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 92.

20 Robert Boyer, *La croissance, début de siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2002), p. 192.

21 Christian Marazzi, ‘Capitalismo digitale e modello antropogenetico di produzione’, in Jean-Louis Laville (ed.), *Reinventare il lavoro* (Rome: Sapere 2000, 2005), pp. 107–26.

is really a *subject*, defined, for example, by a social relationship or a form of life. This should make clear at least the rationale for calling this form of production *biopolitical*, since what are produced are forms of life.

If we return to Marx in this new light, we find that the progression of definitions of capital in his work actually gives us an important clue for analysing this biopolitical context. Although wealth in capitalist society first appears as an immense collective of commodities, Marx reveals that capital is really a process of the creation of surplus value via the production of commodities. But Marx develops this insight one more step to discover that in its essence capital is a *social relation* – or, to extend this even further, the ultimate object of capitalist production is not commodities but social relations or forms of life. From the standpoint of biopolitical production we can see that the production of the refrigerator and the automobile are only midpoints for the creation of the labour and gender relations of the nuclear family around the refrigerator and the mass society of individuals isolated together in their cars on the freeway.

I have highlighted the correspondence or proximity between Marx's definition of communism and the contemporary biopolitical turn of the capitalist economy, both of which are oriented towards the human production of humanity, social relations and forms of life – all in the context of the common. At this point I need to explain how I regard this proximity and why it is important. But before doing so let me add one more element to the mix.

Michel Foucault appreciates all the strangeness and richness of the line of Marx's thinking that leads to the conclusion that '*l'homme produit l'homme*' (using like Marx the gender-defined formulation). He cautions that we should not understand Marx's phrase as an expression of humanism. 'For me, what must be produced is not man as nature designed it, or as its essence prescribes; we must produce something that does not yet exist and we cannot know what it will be.' He also warns not to understand this merely as a continuation of economic production as conventionally conceived: 'I do not agree with those who would understand this production of man by man as being accomplished like the production of value, the production of wealth, or of an object of economic use; it is, on the contrary, destruction of what we are and the creation of something completely other, a total innovation.'²² We cannot understand this produc-

tion, in other words, in terms of the producing subject and the produced object. Instead producer and product are both subjects: humans produce and humans are produced. Foucault clearly senses (without seeming to understand fully) the explosiveness of this situation: the biopolitical process is not limited to the reproduction of capital as a social relation but also presents the potential for an autonomous process that could destroy capital and create something entirely new. Biopolitical production obviously implies new mechanisms of exploitation and capitalist control, but we should also recognize, following Foucault's intuition, how biopolitical production, particularly in the ways it exceeds the bounds of capitalist relations and constantly refers to the common, grants labour increasing autonomy and provides the tools or weapons that could be wielded in a project of liberation.

Now we are in a position to understand the point of recognizing the proximity between the idea of communism and contemporary capitalist production. It is not that capitalist development is creating communism or that biopolitical production immediately or directly brings liberation. Instead, through the increasing centrality of the common in capitalist production – the production of ideas, affects, social relations and forms of life – are emerging the conditions and weapons for a communist project. Capital, in other words, is creating its own gravediggers.²³

I have attempted to pursue two primary points in this essay. The first is a plea for the critique of political economy or, rather, a claim that any communist project must begin there. Such an analysis makes good on our periodizations and reveals the novelties of our present moment by conducting an investigation of not only the composition of capital but also class composition – asking, in other words, how people produce, what they produce, and under what conditions, both in and outside the

22 Michael Foucault, 'Entretien' (with Duccio Tromadori), *Dits et écrits*, vol. 4 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), pp. 41–96, quotation p. 74. Published in English as Michel Foucault, *Remarks on Marx* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), pp. 121–2. At this point in the interview Foucault is discussing his differences from the Frankfurt School.

23 It would be interesting at this point to investigate the relation between this economic discussion of the common and the way the common functions in Jacques Rancière's notion of politics. 'Politics', he writes, 'begins precisely when one stops balancing profits and losses and is concerned instead with dividing the parts of the common' (*Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999], p. 5; *La mésentente* [Paris: Galilée, 1996], p. 24). The common, according to Rancière's notion, is the central and perhaps exclusive terrain of *partage*, that is, the process of division, distribution and sharing. 'Politics', Rancière continues, 'is the sphere of activity of a common that can only ever be contentious, the relationship between parts that are only parties and credentials or entitlements whose sum never equals the whole' (p. 14; pp. 34–5). Perhaps communism, as I conceive it here, is the only form that qualifies for Rancière's notion of politics: the *partage* of the common. I explore the role of the common in Rancière's thought briefly in 'The Production and Distribution of the Common', *Open: Cahier on Art and the Public Domain* 16 (2009): 20–31.

workplace, both in and outside relations of wage labour. And all this reveals, I maintain, the increased centrality of the common.

The second point extends the critique of political economy to the critique of property. And, specifically, communism is defined not only by the abolition of property but also by the affirmation of the common – the affirmation of open and autonomous biopolitical production, the self-governed continuous creation of new humanity. In the most synthetic terms, what private property is to capitalism and what state property is to socialism, the common is to communism.

Putting my two points together – that capitalist production increasingly relies on the common and that the autonomy of the common is the essence of communism – indicates that the conditions and weapons of a communist project are available today more than ever. Now to us the task of organizing it.

9 Communism, the Word (Notes for the Conference)

Jean-Luc Nancy

Not the word before the notion, but the word as notion and as historical agent.

'Communism' is a word with a strange history. It is very difficult to trace its origin. Nevertheless, it is certain that the word 'communist' existed already in the fourteenth century. It referred to 'people having in common a property belonging to the category of "main morte" – that is, not being subject to the law of heritage'. A monastery belongs to the community of the monks, which is, as a community, independent from the individual monks. It seems that at the same time and even earlier, from the twelfth century, the same word designated some aspects of common law and was linked to the communal movement which became the beginning of a bourgeoisie.

Later, namely in the eighteenth century, the word appears in a text written by Victor d'Hupay de Fuveau in 1785 – four years before the French Revolution. It designates the project or the dream of founding a community of life – which precisely is supposed to replace that of the monks.

Here, for example, a quotation from d'Hupay:

This union and this community of a moral-economic regime would be feasible by small groups, in all states, without conflating the fortunes of each, by paying attention to the fair merits of a diversity of talents, something the Zealots of Plato's *Republic* had still not wished to acknowledge. It would strengthen the bonds of human friendship within each profession by excluding all inessential and external distinctions, abhorrent within the same class of Citizens: puerile rivalries that overwhelm and lead states as one to their ruin and to all manner of crimes. Such were the noxious abuses remedied by the simple Sumptuary Law of good King Idomeneus, model of our two Henrys. The Agapes of the first Christians led towards the same goal, by uniting men in this spirit