PLATFORM COMMUNISM

Joss Hands

> The Active social forces work exactly like natural forces: blindly, forcibly, destructively, so long as we do not understand, and reckon with, them. But when once we understand them, when once we grasp their action, their direction, their effects, it depends only upon ourselves to subject them more and more to our own will, and by means of them to reach our own ends. And this holds quite especially of the mighty productive forces of today. (Engels, 1978: 38)

> In a hypercomplex environment that cannot be properly understood and governed by the individual mind, people will follow simplified pathways and will use complexity- reducing interfaces. (Berardi, 2012: 15)

Communist Digitality

The return of communism as a serious political aim was firmly heralded in March 2009 when the conference *The Idea of Communism* was convened by Slavoj Žižek and Costas Douzinas. Having initially been scheduled to take place in a modest conference room in Birkbeck College, it had to be moved to the Institute of Education's Logan Hall, a 933-seat theatre which was subsequently supplemented by spill-over video rooms for those unable to secure a place – even with tickets priced at over a £100 for the three day event. An irony that the even was a sell-out was not lost on the attendees. The resonance of the unabashed use of the term communism, and its seeming success, was such that the conference garnered a fair amount of press interest, with *The Guardian* newspaper reporting that this was 'the hottest ticket in town this weekend' (Campbell, 2009).

The question at the heart of the event, as proclaimed by the organisers in the edited collection published subsequent to the conference, was 'whether "communism" is still the name to be used to designate radical emancipatory projects' and the conclusion amongst the participants that 'one should remain faithful to the name "communism"' (Douzinas & Žižek, 2010: viii). What this

means in practice was judged to be that 'we have to start again and again and beginnings are always the hardest. But it may be that the beginning has already happened, and it is now a question of fidelity to that beginning. This then is the task ahead' (x).

Given the centrality of digital communication to contemporary formations and conceptualisations of identity, self-awareness, social life and activism– as well as the importance of immaterial production to the global economy – the urgency of the debates around *The Idea of Communism* compel us to extend the question of communism to the heart of our current thinking about digital culture. It is about the relationship between the digital as an actually existing realm and the horizon of communist possibility. In the context of digital society, culture and economics there has long been a debate about the value of the emergence of digital public spheres, peer-to-peer production, free, libre and open source software (FLOSS), the creative commons and so forth. However, an engagement with the notion of a communism that includes a commitment to a direct and concerted political challenge to neoliberalism has been wanting. There has been a preference for the language of collaboration, of participation, notions of horizontal structures and distributed organisation without the concomitant challenge to capital as a whole. This long-term absence of a serious commitment to a communist agenda has undoubtedly allowed for a somewhat porous borderline between certain forms of decentralised neoliberal practices of production and surplus value generation, with cooperative production in common. Jodi Dean, in her reflection on the 'Communist Horizon' (2012), makes the case that the focus on democracy in recent social and political movements has allowed capital off the hook.

It is in that spirit that I shall explore here what the communist hypothesis offers for defining what a 'platform communism' might look like. The focus on digital platforms is a vital element in understanding the new media ecology in which we are all now captured. Platforms are simply where the people are, where the power lies and where capital is most fully engaged. Dealing with platform politics requires more than just the taxonomic analysis of platforms; it should also include looking at alternative practices and the pragmatics of antagonism and collective modes of production. Doing only the former risks treating the problem as one of a pre-figurative politics the character of which is already decided. And while this is inevitably one element of my approach here, I shall also take a more general theoretical perspective focussed on how

platforms fit into the broader picture of social and political change and rupture. Two key questions are fundamental to this. Firstly, what actually constitutes a platform? And, secondly, what is communism?

A platform is, in its most general sense, a software framework running on the world wide web or Internet, in the forms of social media interfaces, apps, or most commonly 'Web 2.0' portals that gather users in interfaces with each other and with the Web and Internet itself; key is the provision for user generated content and intensive interaction. As such, this definition would stretch to include major players such as Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Amazon; but also non-proprietorial and open source platforms such as diaspora, Indymedia and Wikipedia. The second question, as to what is communism, presents a more complex problem, to which a more developed answer is needed. I will answer it with reference to three different, related and sometimes interlinked variations on the recent debates over communism.

The Idea(s) of Communism

The return to communism, the concerted attempt to reclaim the name of communism, has not simply been a semantic gesture, an empty rebranding exercise or an electoral realignment; not a *new* communism but rather a rebirth of communisms in dialogue. The multiple nature of what, one might say are, the *ideas* of communism have been taking form. To take just three strands as illustrative, those that I will focus on are foregrounded in the work of Alain Badiou, Slavoj Žižek and the group of thinkers categorised under the umbrella term of *Autonomous Marxism*.

Alain Badiou has been one of the leading philosophers to formulate an unapologetic commitment to a 21st century communism. Badiou's mathematical turn has led him towards a rehabilitated notion of the dialectic and a commitment to sharp historical revolutionary breaks. As a philosopher who has attempted to think against the prevailing limits of philosophy, Badiou has constructed a complex philosophical system that attempts to revitalise notions of the universal and truth, albeit with a sharply original viewpoint. His argument, hinges on his concept of the event. An event in Badiou's terms is a rift in the normal fabric of the world that momentarily shifts the stable structures of perception, meaning, subjectivity and so forth. The event reveals a truth that otherwise would remain

uncovered – the event cannot be predicted, it does not fit into a pre-existing paradigm of understanding, precisely because it exists outside of the prescribed practices and socially and politically legislated modes of existence. An 'event is a surprise' because '[i]f it were not the case, it would mean that would have been predictable as a fact, and so would be inscribed in the history of the State, which is a contradiction in terms' (2010a: 12). The state here functions as the totalising horizon of the possible, the realm which sees over 'a life with neither decision or choice.... whose conventional mediations are the family, work, the homeland, property, religion, customs, and so forth' (11). *Events* thus break through this horizon. Badiou also relates the event to the notion of 'the exception' (2009: 13) and to the 'outside' in philosophical thought.

Badiou argues that the purpose and definition of philosophy is to open up choices, to interrogate the fissures that appear between different regimes of truth – to 'throw light on the value of exception. The value of the event. The value of the break. And to do this against the continuity of life, against social conservatism' (12). The practice of philosophy, in having fidelity to the event thus means 'to be in the exception, in the sense of the event, to keep one's distance from power, and to accept the consequences of a decision' (13). The political conclusion of Badiou's understanding is that notions of politics, such as normal, actually existing democracy, for example, play no role in philosophy whatsoever and precious little role in social change or emancipation, given that all these conservative forces are able to do is elicit small changes or nuanced shifts based on appeals to the least decisive or bold members of a polity, such as swing voters. As such 'you are in the presence of the feeling of the institution, of the regular functioning of institutions' (19).

A central part of this process, of thinking philosophy in a relation to politics and truth, its 'truth procedure', is that of 'subjectivation'. By subjectivation Badiou does not mean a process of becoming a subject in the standard bourgeois individualist sense of the term, but rather a form of awakening or activation as part of a collective. Badiou's thought, while diverging in many respects from a Maoist view, has celebrated elements of Maoist thinking and has defended features of the Maoist programme, for example notably the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Badiou sees the Cultural Revolution as the central political moment of recent times stating that it was 'the only true political creation of the sixties and seventies' (Badiou, 2005: 481). While it was ultimately a failure, Badiou still recognises it as a process in which much revolutionary practice was realised and

brought into being. It forged a process of 'revolutionarization' which entailed the on-going challenge to bureaucracy, including party bureaucracy, to contest the internal constitution of the subject, to engage in 'great exchanges of experience' (482). Its failure was due not to the incorrect aims of the Cultural Revolution, but 'because it turned out to be impossible to unfold the political innovation within the framework of the party state' (484). In that regard we can understand the Cultural Revolution in Badiou's definition of political truth. It was an eruption that pierced the staid secular hierocracy of the Chinese communist party, and the unfolding of that revolution saw the slow failure of fidelity to that truth. As he says, it produced, amongst other things 'totally unpredictable situations, new political statements, texts without precedent, etc.' (486). Out of this experience, however, have come a number of successive political truths and situations; primarily springing from the fact that the Cultural Revolution showed the limitations of revolutions within the confines of the party-state, which on all subsequent occasions have emerged from beyond such boundaries.

However, this evolving tradition is not the only development in the recent revival of interest in communism, there is also the strand of contemporary communist thought that can be identified with the political philosopher Slavoj Žižek, influenced by Lacanian psychoanalytical thinking and elements of Leninist political philosophy. Žižek has argued that the liberal hegemony, symptomatic of the parliamentarianism of neoliberal democracies - which proclaims its constant support for freedom – is one of the greatest mechanisms for presenting a 'formal freedom' in the sense that Lenin used the term, while proscribing any kind of 'true choice', given that 'Formal freedom is the freedom of choice *within* the coordinates of the existing power relations, while actual freedom designates the site of an intervention that undermine these very coordinates' (Žižek, 2002: 544). Thus in the current climate, at least this was the argument in 2002, it is tempting to step back from action given that this 'will be an act *within* the hegemonic ideological coordinates' (545) and as such remain within a 'certain limit'. Rather, according to Žižek, 'to reinvent Lenin's legacy today is to reinvent the politics of truth' (547). What this means for Žižek is not an abstract truth of transcendent knowledge, or one of negotiated compromise, but precisely that of complete one sided commitment. This is in contradistinction to the proclaimed range of current tendencies in left thought. The abiding tendency is that of the comfortable intellectual indulging in the 'narcissism of the lost cause', in deconstructive thinking the moment of realisation of

communism remains forever deferred as a 'dream of presence' (2009: 88). Rather what we see in practice is that 'all successful revolutions … followed the same model, seizing a local opportunity in an extreme and critical situation' (89). The problem with the tradition of revolutionary thought typified in deconstruction is the investment of a group of intellectuals whose genuine commitment is to the retention of the status quo. For example the funnelling of the revolutionary desire of '"radical academics"' who 'silently count on the long-term stability of the American capitalist model' into activities, such as 'excessive Political Correct zeal', a gesture that 'obliges no one to do anything determinate' (2001: 5), a practice that Žižek defines more broadly as interpassivity; that is action that is undertaken unconsciously to avoid confronting prevailing conditions, given that they are always acts 'WITHIN the hegemonic ideological coordinates' (4).

Žižek sees in Lenin the capacity to shock, to act with faith on a revolutionary path even when the prevailing conditions are against this, even if the party begs to differ. There is also recognition that 'the intervention should be *political*, not economic' (554) and as such 'Lenin stands for the compelling freedom to suspend the stale, existing (post)ideological coordinates' (553). However, this is not to revive the great man of history thesis or to fetishise the vanguard party. In his edited collection of Lenin's writing Žižek argues that while bypassing the intransigent party Lenin tapped into a 'revolutionary micropolitics' which instigated 'the incredible explosion of grass-roots democracy, of local committees sprouting up all around Russia's big cities…taking matters into their own hands' (2002b: 7). The key is the moment of distributed vision instigated as the world undergoes a major rupture. This is something of an inverse variation on Naomi Klein's *Shock Doctrine* thesis, in which the 'taking matters into their own hands' becomes the imperative. This is not, as Žižek argues in the introduction to his selection of Lenin's writings, a utopia for a distant moment but '*the urge of the moment is the true utopia*' and in that moment the imperative is to 'invent a new communal social form without a standing army, police or bureaucracy, in which all could take part in the administration of social matters' (2002: 5). And Lenin's greatness lay in his forging of the moment for revolution, in the wake of the disaster of 1914 and against majority opinion, '*he wasn't afraid to succeed*' so that 'instead of waiting until the time was ripe, Lenin organized a pre-emptive strike' (6). Ultimately, Žižek's reading of Lenin places truth as a form of political fidelity and communism as a political act of rupture, a breaking free of the very conditions of

constraint, thinking beyond a politico-economic universe ever turned in upon itself at the edges.

Autonomous Marxism is the final incarnation of the communist hypothesis I shall now turn to. It has its roots in the workerist movement of 1970s Italy, and passes through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari's immanent philosophy, inflected again by the influence of Spinozian ontology. Its most well-known recent variation is to be found in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Hardt and Negri's trilogy, *Empire* (2000), *Multitude* (2004) and *Commonwealth* (2009), sets out a vision for a 21st century autonomist communism, fitting for the globalized deterritorialized capitalism of the information age, but still proclaiming, 'joy of being communist' (2000: 413). This strand of communist thinking disavows the dialectical tradition, instead following a productive understanding of class struggle rooted in Spinoza's ontology and latterly combined with the vitalism of Deleuze and Guattari. The production of multitude as the emergent category of revolutionary activity is that which arises from the shift to immaterial labour that Hardt and Negri, following from Maurizio Lazzarato, see as the decisive shift of the digital era. Hardt, in his contribution to the 'Idea of Communism' conference describes the increasing hegemony of such production and sees its development as one that 'returns to centre stage the conflict between the common and property as such' (2009: 135). This is particularly intense in the realm of the common that capital expropriates from immaterial labour, but the sharing of which actually increases productivity. Working through the contradictions of cognitive capitalism now means that capital no longer creates value through profit but in a return to rent, 'patents and copyrights, for example, generate rent in the sense that they guarantee an income based on the ownership of material or immaterial property', the key point being that 'capital remains generally external to the processes of the production of the common' (2009: 137). The use of rent is a way of valorising the common, without capital intervening in the production process and undermining its productivity. It provides the conditions for multitude to extract itself, and yet at the same time explains the increasing securitisation of the state; ever more modes of control, ever more draconian forms of policing and repressive violence. Finance, Hardt tells us, 'expropriates the common and exerts control at a distance' (138).

The move towards communism in Autonomia is non-dialectical and positive, a process without vanguards and not rooted in the ontology

of the event, though it still suggests significant struggle - especially in the multitude's capacity to recognise itself, to manifest a collective interest. Given the centrality of rent, the creation of a platform communism must ultimately rest on the throwing off of the capacity of capital to extract rent. The first difficulty with regard to this is that the forms of rent are not always obvious, as the mechanisms of valorisation are profoundly enfolded in everyday social life. Yet capital still contains the seeds of its own destruction, not automatically, but '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' (143). Indeed, in a recent interview Michael Hardt reiterates the importance of retaining the word communism as part of this struggle, so as to resist the reduction of the idea to be defined by its opponents; he tells us that it is 'important for us to recognise alternatives within the tradition and affirm the streams we value most. We thus feel the need to struggle over the concept of communism and insist on what we consider its proper meaning' (2012: np).

While exhibiting many similarities, the differences between the Badiou, Žižek and autonomist variations of communism need to be noted. While these are perhaps subtle they are nonetheless significant for thinking through the multifarious possibilities of platform communism. Žižek does not offer a positive prescription of the shape of future communism, which would undermine his fundamental commitment to communism as processual, in line with 'Marx's notion of communism not as an ideal, but as a movement' (2009: 88). However what he does claim is that the communist movement necessarily emerges from antagonism, or in particular, four antagonisms: ecological catastrophe; private property in the predominant form of intellectual property; new techno-scientific developments; and new forms of apartheid (91). The distinct element of Žižek's thinking, which is of particular note for us, is the internal character of the antagonism that pushes against capital's constitution of the entirety of life. This distinctly dialectical position entails the capacity to break open these antagonisms and forge them into class positions capable of creating the communist moment. Here his interpretation of a Leninist commitment is clear in that what he sees is the multiple coagulation of elements around a specific antagonism, but one which is universalised in its opposition to capital by the forth antagonism. This vital fourth antagonism is located in the exploitation of labour - as that which capital cannot do without, even when the others may be overcome in variations of

socialism and communitarianism, here exists the specific need for communism: 'it is only this reference to the Excluded that justifies the use of the term communism' (97). What we see in Žižek and Autonomia is also a remnant of the subject as agent - perhaps a fragment of the Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts, that is missing from Badiou - for example when Žižek argues that the antagonisms also have in common 'the process of proletarianization, of the reduction of human agents to pure subjects deprived of their substance' (99). This claim implies such a substance, or rather quality, as species being. This position also provides means of resistance. Exclusion activates significance of the 'part of no-part' in which the excluded come to represent the universal. We have, Žižek tells us, 'a name for the intrusion of the Excluded into the socio-political space: democracy' (99). This suggests a more agent based drive towards subjectivation than Badiou offers, a notion that clearly articulates with the autonomy of the multitude as a collective agent.

Badiou, then, in the crudest terms, invokes the event as emerging from outside the situation, the intervention of the other as absolute. As he suggests, the event is *of* but not *in* the situation. Here, I will argue, lies the limitation for thinking the Badiouian event as the pivot of a specifically 'platform' communism, given the closedness of most platforms within looped cybernetic systems. For Žižek the event is still of powerful significance, the break that opens up the situation, but though internal antagonisms that to some degree are always already present within capital, but through a dialectical struggle within it. The Autonomist approach lends powerful theoretical ammunition to this perspective by suggesting a process less of the event per se, than it is of the unfolding and decomposition of capital in the exodus of multitude from capital: it is its crippling withdrawal that destroys capital's capacity to generate surpluses.

While the three strands in clear ways are district, and indeed at odds, they also have much in common, and all have something to add in their commitment to the common – as I will go on to explore more fully later in this article. So it is on the basis of these distinct, but overlapping, visions that I will draw my discussion of platform communism. The potential, and in some cases actuality, that I have identified are by no means exhaustive but are an attempt to build a framework for further exploration. The danger of drifting into a technological utopianism is clear, so I will also note the limitations and dangers of these strands of communist thought as they articulate with the politics of platforms.

Towards a Platform Communism: Evental Horizons

In cosmology the event horizon is the edge of all that happens and all that can be seen. Analogous to such a horizon, in social media, is the edge of the social: that which is in between and hidden amongst the interstices of the network's rhizomes. These interstices are *evental horizons* in the sense that we can see the social disappearing into the unseen regions of code, protocol and the 'dark' net regions of the unmapped. Yet at the point of disappearance we need to ask whether something new, fresh and 'true' can emerge? This is the Badiouian question, and it requires an understanding of what might stop this from happening in digital networks and platforms; what needs to be overcome, in the first instance, is *control*.

The details for the control society, as originally framed in Gilles Deleuze's *Postscript on Control Societies* (1995), are well known and widely discussed, but as applied to platforms we see at stake not only individual and collective social relations but also the material substrates of platforms and the networks upon which they depend. Alexander Galloway (2004) and Alexander Galloway & Eugene Thacker (2007), argue that it is in the protocols, the algorithms and the source code - which drive our digital communications systems - that control resides. Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has also argued that in many respects digital networks come to underpin what Michel Foucault referred to as governmentality, in profound and integrated ways. For example, Chun tells us that graphical user interfaces (GUIs) augment the acceptance of the logic of neoliberalism within computer users by supplementing the idea of the self-contained rationally driven economic unit; we see this in the way that GUIs help 'move their users from grudging acceptance to feelings of mastery and eagerness' and also help produce '"informed" individuals who can overcome the chaos of global capitalism' (2011: 8). Chun tells us that 'new media empowers people by informing them of their future' (8). Of course this is simply a fantasy and far from reality as she goes on to explain, 'The dream is: the resurgence of the seemingly sovereign individual, the subject driven to know…the dream is the more that an individual knows, the better decisions he or she can make' (8). In her more recent writing Chun has developed this critique to include the analysis of crises as the driving force of new media, arguing that '[c]odes and crises together produce (the illusion of) mythical and mystical sovereign subjects who weld together norm with reality, word with action' (92).

The possibility of the *event* requires something radically new to enter the world, something unknown and unknowable. Control thus present a fundamental problem for a Badiouian politics of digital rebellion, given the parameters of digital *events* that, like any other, necessitate the radically new. If the digital realm is one that is fundamentally characterised by its prescriptive nature then the realm of the digital has almost become defined, according to Richard Grusin, especially since 9/11, as one of pre-mediation. Grusin argues that media, and digital media in particular, now truncate or short circuit the possibly of events entirely. Consumers of media are framed within a set of technical and semiotic boundaries that keep them within the scope of acceptable possibilities, of choices within the prevailing political parameters of not only actions but also affects. If all possible pathways are being chased down by processes of premediation, then decisions are based either on a movement along algorithmic pathways, whose parameters are by definition already pre-empted, or affective responses that have become embedded in unanswerable preconscious iterations of cybernetic self-comforting.

Here we can see not only digital networks in their own terms, but also the extent to which they have become entwined with a wider military-industrial- entertainment complex. Badiou himself, in his exegesis on love, implies the difficulty of a platform event when he discusses the process of online dating. According to Badiou dating sites offer only an antiseptic version of love, that is a 'love comprehensively insured against all risks' (2012: 6). Badiou associates such a love with the promise of a '"zero deaths" war' (8) wherein the risks are all systemically offset and the daters 'won't find it difficult to dispatch the other person if they do not suit' (9). While it is not overtly stated, the conjecture is that a dating platform filters out all contingencies and possibilities for encounter. While such filters obtain in all kinds of situations, in a protocological digital network the algorithm that controls selection processes and eliminates those unsuitable from view instigates a material bar from the exposure to chance. 'Safety-First love, like everything governed by the norm of safety, implies the absence of risks for people who have a good insurance policy' (9). This logic is the same one in operation across major social networking platforms, all of which maintain strict protocological limits on encounters, they gather the processes of linking and distribution under a single prescriptive proprietorial framework and patterning. Yet it is precisely here, in the singular framework of protocol, that attempts to subvert this risk adverse logic are always present.

The possibility that a digital *event* might happen needs to be explored with the protocols of the network and platform in mind. In what sense could we understand a digital platform as offering the chance for a rupture of the presented world and the breaking through of a truth? To begin to answer this question we need to ask whether the control situation described above can be challenged, thus if the platform infrastructure itself can be hacked and re-directed from control to freedom. We also need to ascertain whether capital's constant crises and systemic anomalies and breaks always produce control, or whether cracks and spaces can nevertheless appear - whether from within code itself or from elsewhere – and as such if platforms open possibilities for the radically new? Beyond this we need to ask if an avenue, or perhaps even a *line of flight,* can open up onto the communist horizon.

One model that offers such a potential is the use of the 'exploit'; that is a systemic flaw, break or even opening that can be worked at, pushed and leveraged against the system itself. The concept is developed by Alex Galloway and Eugene Thacker who argue that '*within protocological networks, political acts generally happen not by shifting power from one place to another but by exploiting power differentials already existing in the system*' (2007: 81). These include the power of viruses or worms that often do not damage systems but rather find paths and ways to use the protocological controls against themselves. Often such exploits also generate emergent effects, evolving from within systems and acting as non-human agents. Galloway and Thacker, while recognising that such entities as viruses and worms are not a concrete model for 'progressive' politics, argue that they can give us a glimpse at both 'the plasticity and fragility of control in networks' (95).

One key tactic for resistance that Galloway and Thacker induce from this logic is that of disappearance; to become hidden in the society of control is to short-circuit its capacity to accumulate data. Seb Franklin (2009) builds on Galloway and Thacker's theory of the exploit and tells us that it is exactly in the ambiguity of being unclassifiable as either user (consumer) or producer (labourer), that resistance can be found. Thus it is 'not a question of hiding, or living off the grid, but living on the grid, in potentially full informatic view, but in a way that makes one's technical specification or classification impossible' (Franklin, 2009: np). The simple flashing of an infra-read beam into a camera, or the practice of 'circuit bending' in which technologies are diverted and misdirected, not with highly technical programming but rudimentary hacking using only basic technical

knowledge. This would include practices of becoming anonymous, of encryption and use of 'dark' nets using software such as Tor. These are consistent with Galloway and Thacker's taxonomy of the exploit as passing through the stages of *Vector, Flaw and Transgression* (97).

However, it is ambiguous whether the outcomes of such tactics can be related to the emergence of an *event*. The disappearance and the use of exploits is still operating deep within the parameters of the control systems of protocol, and as such would be more akin to an internal tremor or remodulation. In that regard the Žižekian conception of the working through of an intrinsic antagonism would be the necessary supplement to this understanding of political action, the act of pushing an antagonism to breaking point – of forcing it beyond an internal contradiction into a generalised revolutionary situation. Therefore such hacks and exploits may well interpose in the operation of control long enough to create disruptions that escape from behind the *evental horizon,* but aren't themselves *events*. They are rather *shocks* that bend, stretch and rupture; such *shocks* are characterised by their unpredictable ramifications and knock-on effects, including unforeseen emergent features. Any protocological network *event*, in that sense, may not be a 'pure event' as such, but is just such a *shock* - a spanner in the smooth systemic modulations of probability.

This process still relies on the intervention of those who render themselves invisible or unclassifiable, and therefore will and agency remain components of such a politics. To put it another way, disappearance and the hidden actions undertaken behind the *evental horizon* are a form of resistant pre-mediation, contributing to the forcing of what Galloway and Thacker would call *impulsion* or *hypertrophy*. This practice is designed not to resist technology but to 'push technology into a hypertrophic state, further than it is meant to go' (98). This raises the question of a subjectivation prior to such exploits. Here Žižek's return to Lenin is helpful in clarifying this standpoint, wherein Leninism entails multiple agents coalescing around a one-sided commitment to forcing the exploit.

One such example is *Face-to-Facebook,* an artwork that was based on an exploit. The instigators, Paolo Cirio and Alessandro Ludovico, harvested more than one million Facebook profiles using custom software. Then, using an adapted face recognition algorithm they categorised the faces and matched them, much in the way that Mark Zuckerberg did with his original 'facemesh' algorithm, reworking the

database into a mock dating website. The potential to realise a desired potential - the unspoken feature of the platform - to meet potential partners, is clearly a move to circumvent the 'safety-first' love described by Badiou. The project authors tell us the user's 'smiles will finally reach what they unconsciously really want: more relationships with unknown people', but also the 'project starts to dismantle the trust that 500 million people have put in Facebook'. They also explicitly recognise that 'we are trying to formulate a simple hack that everybody can potentially use…that shows, once more, how fragile and potentially manipulable the online environment actually is' (Ludovico & Cirio).

This hack operates in the mode of hypertrophy, pushing Facebook beyond its limits, re-engineering that which is enmeshed in its desiring circuits. While it remains difficult to see this as the engineering of an *event,* it is a ludic form of a programmed *shock.* In circumscribing the algorithmic control of encounters – the limit so disliked by Badiou - it brings to the fore the experience of a local truth that choices are simply a series of forked pathways that undermine the aleatory at every junction. We can therefore identify the concept of the hack as a central element of any platform communism, but the hack in the specific sense used by McKenzie Wark (2004): a creative act, a moment of generative abstraction that opens a way for new occurrences and things, new connections and ideas to be made. In many ways such a perspective is still in line with the broader philosophy of the event: hacks create *shocks,* and *shocks* ripple out, mutating distorting and shifting power. So it is that *Face-to-Facebook* creates receptivity, preparing the ground for subjectivation by providing the experience of usually concealed truths about the experience of online-dating.

It may thus be apposite to talk about fidelity to the hack as one appropriate procedure of platform communism. One other concrete example of this, though by no means complete and in many ways gestural, is the hacker collective Anonymous's political awakening. Anonymous sprang up out of the 'dark net'; primarily the chat rooms and notice boards of '4 Chan'. It consisted originally of assemblages of cynical mocking 'trollers' circulating memes through underground websites and attacking those they understood as pompous, self-important, or just plain stupid. Anonymous's political commitment was activated through a confrontation with an external antagonist in the form of the Church of Scientology. Once this confrontation had taken place the *ad hoc* group - previously tied together by little more than a sense of humour, a fascination with

technology and a dislike of authority - found a resonance and a collective purpose. This manifested in a series of cooperative acts of disruption that spiralled to include attacks on such stalwarts of capital as Amazon and eBay, the first for un-hosting Wikileaks and the second for refusing to process donations to the same. While Anonymous is not an overtly communist, or even anti-capitalist, collective its actions and its mode of coming together show a pathway that could be diverted towards such ends. While the fissure and moment of subjectivation was not brought into being using mainstream commercial platforms such as *Facebook* or *Twitter*, mainstream social networking platforms were used in highly effective supplementary ways to spread the word and to find sympathetic individuals who could be brought into action – precisely in the zone of ambiguity between user and programmer. Here we have the leveraging of hypertrophy over control on a sufficient scale to affect broader social change.

Platform Intellect

On a protocological level the limitations of commercial platforms for a platform communism are clear. These include restrictions of access to source code, algorithmic management of data and the conversion of their users' activities into a commodity and the users into providers of free labour. In that regard the affordances of commercial platforms are always already defined by the limits of their paymasters, shareholders and advertisers. The exploits so far discussed work primarily on this protocological or software layer. However, there is also a natural language layer and an affective layer of such platforms that remain relatively vulnerable, primarily because capital still relies on the revenue generated by users as the core of its business. In short, commercial platforms have to leave some social interaction that is relatively free and open for their users because they are reliant on them to generate their revenue. As such there is an absolute limit on social media platforms' capacity to control communication. It is this absolute limit that provides the antagonistic space for what can be described as a natural language exploit; enabling communicative action and unforced affective flows to take place.

Thus Facebook, Twitter and a number of other large scale commercial platforms, such as YouTube, Google+, Tubmlr, Digg, eBay, Pinterest - while being fundamentally entrenched in capital economy and functioning towards the valorisation of social labour -

still offer opportunities for large scale connectivity and for deliberation and coordination on a broad scale. This then provides an opportunity for anti-capitalist political coordination and organisation to take place. There are numerous examples of this, and while I do not intend to revisit a sterile 'Twitter revolution' debate, such natural language layer exploits have been clearly seen in the use of platforms in the array of uprisings around the world from 2009 onwards, as well as with the various continuing Occupy and anti-austerity movements. What these movements reveal is the folly of understanding the Internet as anything other than fully integrated with matter, bodies, space and discourse. This is not to discount the significance, constraints and affordances of code, but to recognise that platforms are also dependant on general intellect.

It is in the notion of general intellect that Autonomous Marxism finds its inspiration, and it is to Autonomous Marxism that I will again now turn. The nature of digital capital as parasitic on social labour means it cannot contain or eliminate the processes of communication that fuel and perpetuate the general intellect. Marx's prediction in the 'fragment on machines' (1973) that general intellect would be absorbed into constant capital, has proved unfounded to the extent that the value creating power of the human brain has yet to be fully captured by the way of a 'real subsumption'. The human brain, with its capacities for invention, empathy and understanding, is therefore an element of the means of production that is deeply elusive to capital. Capital's solution is to instigate a full-spectrum platform biopower. That is an array of interrelated platforms that attempt to encroach on all aspects of human life, including the general intellect. But capital has failed, even as it has inflicted severe wounds on the brain of labour in that failure. Capital is restricted to a formal, rather than a real, subsumption of the social, so long as elements of social relations remain at least partially inseparable from, and parasitic on, the human brain. These include aspects of unconscious and affective brain activity. In that regard we can see a parallel 'exploit' at work operating not only at the level of code but also at the level of the use of platforms: that is, the excess capacities of the multitude to organise and create using the means provided by capital.

One of the most compelling recent thinkers to have reflected on these issues, and who is closely associated with the autonomist tradition, is Franco 'Bifo' Berardi. In Berardi's *The Uprising* (2012) he critiques the current condition of the 'infosphere' as being 'too dense and too fast for a conscious elaboration of information' (2012:

15). The rampant neo-liberal deracination of the social has meant that Europe itself has become a 'sad project of destroying, of devastating, of dismantling the general intellect' (39), and that democracy is now under severe threat once 'techno-financial automatisms have taken the place of political decisions' (53). What we see then is a failure of solidarity because cognitive labour has been subjected to 'techno-linguistic automatisms'. In a situation in which 'you cannot build solidarity between fragments of time' (55) the aim must be to dismantle these mechanisms and reconnect using a different logic, the purpose of which is not 'product growth, profit and accumulation' (64). This is the only way to combat what Berardi has elsewhere referred to as the 'schizo-economy', given its reliance on the human brain, and tendency to produce a 'psychic collapse' (2007: 80). The result of this is a call to action: 'following the example of Wikileaks, we must organize a long lasting process of dismantling and rewriting the techno-linguistic automatisms enslaving us all' (54). The primary objective of the current struggle must be to create a 'psycho-affective reactivation of the social body' (2012: 55) because 'only when the general intellect is able to reconnect with the social body will we be able to start a process of real autonomization' (55). Berardi's specific solution to this problem is a call to reinvigorate the power of language as dislocated from the exchangeability of capital, through a poetic and ironic stance wherein '[p]oetry is the reopening of the indefinite, the ironic active exceeding the established meaning of words' (158). In other words, the antagonism through which the human brain has eluded the real subsumption can be re-invigorated by linguistic forms such as poetry, or to put it bluntly: poetry as hacking.

Thus Autonomous Marxism offers one further route to imagine platform communism, which is through an opening in the natural language layer of platforms in an exodus from the reified language of capital. There has been success in building new kinds of publics along these lines and new creative interventions in the politics of space with, for example, the Occupy movement. Although it is looking like Occupy has so far failed in longer-term institution building it does not mean that platform communism should not aspire to go beyond disruptions of commercial or hegemonic platforms. Platform communism also needs to work towards creating commons based platforms oriented towards the longer term nourishing of the social brain and the building of new kinds of commons based institutions to achieve Berardi's aims.

For example AAAAARG.ORG is a publishing platform for the sharing of digitalised books and articles. It is not in the strict sense open, as it is password protected, but thus as such operates on a tactic of invisibility. However, passwords are distributed according to request and the books offered as a common pool resource to a community that is highly sympathetic towards the principles and the value of open knowledge. It offers a glimpse of both disruption and commoning by its users, taking commonly available hardware, scanners and simple encoding software to turn printed material into PDF format. This then allows sharing of the results, taking advantage of the Web's distributed form and the easy availability of security measures originally designed to protect capital. AAAAARG.ORG has also avoided the Web's most centralised control protocol, the domain name system, by simple tricks such as shifting the number of A letters in its URL. Beyond this the platform is still antagonistic, as well as being merely prefigurative. It disrupts through de-commodifying books and making them common, undermining the artificial scarcity that capital's copyright regime is deigned to create.

This may not appear distinct from the Google Books project, as far as its immediate impact on publishing goes, but the longer-term implications are quite distinct as a process of commoning. This is exemplified in that AAAAARG.ORG is also a platform for deliberation. It provides a space for discussions on the books it makes common and operates as a platform for the organisation of 'The Public School'; a project for the sharing of knowledge and expertise, formed as an *ad hoc* commons based university. In Cornelia Sollfrank's interview with the founder of AAAAARG.ORG, in this special issue, Sean Dockray discusses the inspiration for the platform as being a love of books and learning, and so it was founded as an expression of curiosity and free creation. The accusations and ramifications that have led to it being categorised as a 'pirate' operation, and the legal actions against it, are clearly then reactions to its threats to profit: its power to *shock.*

In the case of both commons oriented and purely antagonistic platforms the question becomes whether they can be maintained and developed, given the cost of upkeep in both immediate economic and political terms, in often hostile legal, political and technical contexts. This is exemplified in the push against net neutrality from influential elements within the US government, as well as the recent legal ruling in the UK that has forced a number of ISPs to shut down access to file sharing websites such as *The Pirate*

Bay and *Kick Ass Torrents*. There are also a number of smaller ongoing struggles, for example the publisher Verso issued injunctions against AAAAARG.ORG, forcing it to remove certain titles from its platform. This was somewhat ironic given that it is Verso that publishes a number of the recent books exploring the communist hypothesis, including editions by Alain Badiou, Jodi Dean and Slavoj Žižek. Given the massive state, corporate and legal systems at work, the capacity of one individual or group to maintain disruptive or commons based platforms may not be sustainable - no matter their technical skills. The greater impact of AAAAARG.ORG and others may well be in loss, and in the sense of outrage when people find their assumed right to access and share knowledge – to be part of the general intellect - has been curtailed by legal, state and corporate apparatuses.

What thus remains vital for a broader communist hypothesis is the forcing of action, the pragmatics of coordination and the movement beyond prefigurative zones towards mass exodus. The facility for platforms to support the affiliations and sympathies of the multitude needs to be established. These should assist in locating, as Bifo puts it, the 'common ground of understanding among the interlocutors, a sympathy among those who are involved in the ironic act' (168). The aim also needs to be for such platforms to be materially maintained while being permanently dislocated from capital. These are not technically difficult problems, but rather political and economic obstacles. Therefore, what is indisputably necessary for an on-going platform communism is firstly, to act and to communicate, to move towards subtraction from capital; and secondly, to produce 'common' platforms able to help sustain and maintain the communist horizon as a living reality. That includes building spaces, places and subjectivities (in Badiou's sense) that provide the momentum for exodus and for subtraction from capital, and in the long-term help in healing the psychic wounds capital inflicts. Such platforms would constitute a counter *dispositif*. Vitally the counter *dispositif* needs to incorporate the offline world correspondingly - platforms alone will do nothing – so as to reclaim all dimensions of space and time; here the extensive material and spatial character of platforms must be well understood. Whatever the details of any specific platforms to come, we can be sure it is in the becoming common that we will find the most powerful opening for realising platform communism.

Conclusion: From Platform to Full Communism

To contribute to the realisation of a truly 'full' communism platforms needs to become part of a greater revolutionary process, in which the overall power to valorise and absorb creativity is wrestled from capital. In their summary of key themes from the *Idea of Communism* conference Douzinas and Žižek argue that, above all,

> Neo-Liberal capitalist exploitation and domination takes the form of new enclosures of the commons (language and communication, intellectual property, genetic material natural resources and forms of governance). Communism, by returning to the concept of the 'common', confronts capitalist privatizations with a view to building a new commonwealth. (Douzinas & Žižek, 2010: xi)

This commonwealth should aim to 'bring about freedom and equality. Freedom cannot flourish without equality and equality does not exist without freedom' (x).

Within all strands of communist thought the notion of the common has been of central importance. This is also true of all three variations of the communist hypothesis that have been employed in this article. While the emergence of 'Web 2.0' was lauded as a move towards openness and creative liberation it was quite clearly a way of capturing for profit the freely offered time of its users. There are many other liberatory narratives from various proponents of a frictionless, collaborative non-exploitative capitalism, often holding up *Wikipedia* and other open source projects like Linux or Apache, (Benkler, 2006; Shirky 2011) but only in so far as they provide useful recourses for generating bigger surpluses and more value. So it is that while such examples do offer a model of cooperation and an overcoming of certain of Žižek's four antagonisms, they do not challenge the fundamental antagonism, the one which is unavoidably anti-capitalist: exploitation and the division of the classes. Thus the struggle for the common - which is also the underpinning logic of platform communism - must include the challenge to capitalism as such. Žižek's claim that it is the antagonisms *within* capital where the opportunity lies is therefore tactically most helpful here. This distinctly dialectical position entails the imperative to turn antagonisms into class positions capable of creating the communist moment. It is the 'apartheid'

between capital and labour that capital cannot do without, even when other antagonisms may be papered over. Here exists the specific need for communism, 'it is only this reference to the excluded that justifies the use of the term communism' (97).

This is in line with Badiou's communist invariants, which are 'intellectual patterns, always actualized in a different fashion' (2008: 35). These have their roots in 'the universal aspiration of the exploited to topple every principle of exploitation and oppression' (Bosteels, 2011: 277). Such a commitment to the key communist invariant - the ending of exploitation and oppression - is a constituent of an on-going historical movement in which the digital age must be included, and to which 'platformification' must belong. As Žižek argues, '[w]ithout the World Wide Web' socialism would be impossible…[o]ur task is here merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive' (2002: 17).

Such a possibility is indicated in the notion of 'commonism', as described by Nick Dyer-Witheford, when he analyses what the digital organization of the common would require. In the first instance, a planner commons that would ensure, through the forms of deliberation and organisation, both a fair process of decision making in planning and the fair distribution of resources and opportunities. He tells us that a 'twenty-first century communism can be envisioned as a complex unity of terrestrial, planner, and networked commons, in which each reinforces and enables the other' (Dyer-Witheford, 2006). Dyer-Witheford also develops this argument in the strongest terms in his article in this special issue, where he lays out how a vision of digital communism or K-ommunism could be organised to take advantage of the massive leaps in computer power that have occurred since the Soviet vision of a 'Red Plenty'.

Another related aspiration that is argued for by Dmytri Kleiner in his *Telekommunist Manifesto* (2010) is that of 'venture communism (a notion also discussed in Cornelia Sollfrank's interview with Kleiner - also in this special issue. Such a concept is one of peer-to-peer wealth generation on a scale that allows for the marshalling of shared resources for the enrichment of the common. It is necessary that 'workers are able to form their own capital, and thereby retain the entire product of their labour', which means a prefigurative stage of worker organisation in order to create enough common wealth to

create common means of production. Such an aim is 'a battle for capacities'. So it is that '[c]hange then requires the application of enough wealth to overcome the wealth of those who resist such a change' (Kleiner, 2010: 10).

Thus the necessary transition from a *platform* to a *full* communism must be a dialectically related movement between the disruption and hypertrophy of exiting commercial platforms and the creation and expansion of platforms of common organisation, production and distribution in a movement towards the common good.

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