REVIEW ESSAY/ESSAI CRITIQUE

Weakness, Paradox and Communist Logics: A Review Essay

Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism: From Heidegger to Marx.* **New York: Columbia University Press, 2011; 256 pages. ISBN: 978-0231158022.**

Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis.* **Trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran. London: Verso, 2010; 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1844676002.**

Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript.* **Trans. Thomas H. Ford. London: Verso, 2009; 160 pages. ISBN: 978-1844674305.**

By Maxwell Kennel, University of Waterloo.

> "The philosophers have only *described* the world in various ways; the moment has now arrived to *interpret* it."
> — Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala, *Hermeneutic Communism*

In their recent contribution to the "Insurrections" series (edited by Žižek, Davis, Crockett, and Robbins) authors Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala set out to reveal the deep link between communism and hermeneutics. Beginning with an exposition on Heidegger and the death of metaphysics, Vattimo and Zabala critique the violence of Enlightenment realism, which they call "the simple analysis and conservation of facts in order to help scientific disciplines develop." (HC, 14) Suggesting that metaphysics can only be overcome through a process of "incorporating, twisting, or weakening" (HC, 1), the authors continue by joining the thought of Heidegger, Derrida and Nietzsche against the "neutralization of differences" and the resulting conservative philosophy which too often serves the dominant political power of western neoliberal democracy. (HC, 14) Between the philosophical and political spheres Vattimo and Zabala assert that "Violence is the political meaning of truth," and assert further that this violence is much like the imposing face of metaphysics so opposed by Heidegger, Derrida, and others. (HC, 18) Against this politics of truth, and intentionally distanced from Alain Badiou and Antonio Negri's commitment to the supposed strength of counter-insurrection, Vattimo and Zabala locate the strength of both communism and hermeneutics in a most unlikely place: *their weakness.*

For the authors of *Hermeneutic Communism* it is only the weakness of both communism and hermeneutics that can lead to their joint emancipation from both the violence of capitalism in the political sphere, and from the violence of metaphysics in the philosophical sphere. Rather than communising hermeneutics or hermeneuticising communism the authors of *Hermeneutic Communism* seek to bring light to the present "lack of emergency" and "the increasing homologizing of the political, economic, and social structures of power." (HC, 2) Against the all too modern theories and social practices representing the status quo, Vattimo and Zabala proclaim that "politics cannot be founded on scientific and rational grounds but only on interpretation, history, and event." (HC, 2) The weakness of hermeneutics, found in the plurality of interpretive truths that it affirms, stands opposed to the rationalistic violence of the aforementioned politics of truth. Following from the weakness of hermeneutics, the weakness of communism can also be located in its failure, a failure which (as it is said) fails again and fails better (Beckett).

Late in the short book, the authors hold up certain democratic South American communist governments (those of Chávez and Morales) as viable alternative models to both the strong Soviet communism which has so evidently failed, and the strong capitalist governments of the western variety. Rather than the forcible strength of capitalism, the authors conjugate communism and hermeneutics in the name of their "theoretical weakness," a weakness which is opposed to the logic of war and affirms a qualified sort of nonviolent revolutionary stance. (HC, 140) Concluding the final section of the book, entitled "The South American Alternative," Vattimo and Zabala link the revolutionary stance of hermeneutic communism to the nonviolent methods of "passive resistance, such as boycotts and strikes" and stress that these alternative forms of revolutionary action are only effective if the masses take part. (HC, 140) Contrasted with ordinary professions of the truth of nonviolence, Vattimo and Zabala clarify that "hermeneutic communism cannot assure peaceful existence, dialogue, or a tranquil life, because this 'normal' realm already belongs to the winners within framed democracies," rather than belonging to the losers, the oppressed and the weak. (HC, 138) In light of this commitment to the weak defense of the weak, below I will briefly situate this commitment to both weakness and hermeneutic thought within two particular logics present in the emerging discourse of the New Communism.

Before moving on I should point out that *Hermeneutic Communism* is a short work despite the physical size of the book itself. The textual apparatus (endnotes, bibliography and index) makes up the last one hundred pages of the two hundred and fifty page work. Despite its thin profile the content itself is formidable in achieving both its critical and scholarly aims. In this way *Hermeneutic Communism* is already close in nature to the small red hardcover books that make up the bulk of Verso's series entitled "The Communist Hypothesis." The series is premised upon Badiou's statement in his book *The Meaning of Sarkozy* that "communism is the right hypothesis" and that those who do not acknowledge this truth ultimately must resign themselves to "the inevitable and 'natural' character of the most monstrous inequalities" evident in the capitalist market economy and parliamentary democracy.[1] To contrast the latter association, in *Hermeneutic Communism* Vattimo and Zabala affirm the truth of democracy by citing Rorty's and Derrida's association of hermeneutics with democracy, and its resulting "respect of minorities, differences, and the weak." (HC, 6)

Placing the popular collections *The Idea of Communism (I & II)* aside, I would like to situate Vattimo and Zabala's book alongside specific aspects of Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* and Boris Groys' *The Communist Postscript*. Following from the conference on "The Idea of Communism" in 2009, these two works, as far as I can tell, constitute an important arm of the theoretical genesis of the New Communism. Strangely enough both works contain a sort of communist logic, neither of which can be identified with the formal or syllogistic logics of analytic philosophy. I will begin with a brief sketch of Badiou's *logic of the site*, then Groys' *logic of paradox*, and conclude by situating these alongside Vattimo and Zabala's own *hermeneutic logic*.

I. Alain Badiou: A Logic of the Site

Alain Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* is not presented in as unified a fashion as Vattimo and Zabala's *Hermeneutic Communism*. Instead of being concerned with a sole conjugation of two concepts like Vattimo and Zabala's work, Badiou's *Communist Hypothesis* broadly surveys and interprets the events of May 1968, the Cultural Revolution, and the Paris Commune, and concludes with an essay entitled "The Idea of Communism" and a letter to Slavoj Žižek concerning his interpretation of Mao Zedong.

The short section of the work that I would like to focus on occurs towards the end of the third section on the Paris Commune where Badiou outlines a "logic of the site" or alternately an "ontology of the commune." Extracted from the specifics of his interpretation of the Paris Commune itself, Badiou's logic of the site appears to be *formalised* in its presentation via operators (multiple, transcendental, etc.) but not *formal* in the violent sense of fixing upon a singular truth out of the plurality of hermeneutic possibilities present in any given situation. For Badiou, a site is an intense singularity which paradoxically possesses a multiple composition. The singular nature of the site is such that it is found in a concrete historical situation, and the multiple nature of the site is its set theoretical relation of self-belonging. The logical operator called the "site" is not merely an ontological figure defined by particularity, but also defined by the "unfolding of its consequences." (CH, 209)   When Badiou writes that a "site is the appearing/disappearing of a multiple whose paradox is self-belonging" (CH, 211), he is not trying to isolate the bare fact of an instant. Instead he is indexing the particularity of a real situation in light of the transcendental, and allowing the "potential for an event" to be actualised in a site, a procedure which requires the site to possess a maximal intensity of existence. (CH, 215) Contrasted with the site possessing maximal existential intensity—a proper singularity—is the site with a less than maximal existential intensity: a fact.

Read alongside the critique of Enlightenment realism offered by Vattimo and Zabala, the logic of the site developed by Badiou is capable of contributing to the mutual concern of a theory of the event. This contribution is not merely the creation of a logic which resists any reduction of the concern of logic to mere fact. More than this, the logic of the site rests upon an ontological paradox between being and non-being, or existence and void. Badiou describes the site that becomes a strong singularity as an event, and notes that the maximal intensity of the site has a nil value in the situation itself. (CH, 221) This nil value appears to correspond with other figures of absence which Badiou discusses elsewhere in his work, from the discussion of nonbeing in the first chapter of *Being and Event*, to the void of multiplicity found in his *Logics of Worlds*. Before moving on, it should also be pointed out that the latter half of the third section of *The Communist Hypothesis* and Section I of Book V in *Logics of Worlds* are very similar. Some paragraphs even appear to be identical to one another, such as the section in *The Communist Hypothesis* called "The Commune is a site – ontology of the Commune" and the section "Subversion of Appearing by Being: The Site" in *Logics of Worlds*.

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[1] Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, (tr.) David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2008), 97–98.

When Badiou calls the "existence of an inexistent" a "violent paradox" it follows that the violation enacted is upon the boundary of logical law. (CH, 222) When the inexistent aspect of the situation is filled by the maximal intensity which the event requires, then the paradox is fulfilled. The paradox resolves for Badiou because, as soon as the inexistent aspect of the situation is fulfilled by the maximal existence of a site, another inexistent aspect enters the site ensuring that the law is consistent and coherent. (CH, 224)

This consistency and coherence is, however, not enough for the weak of the world, as Vattimo and Zabala might put it. Badiou's logic of the site is only a minimally *paradoxical* logic because it coheres in the resolution of its main contradiction. Vattimo and Zabala's weak communism affirms the communal plurality of interpretations—an often contradictory multiplicity which will not be saved by the resolution of differences in a consistently or coherently formalised structure. This brings us from Badiou's minimally paradoxical communist logic to the even more paradoxical logic presented by Boris Groys in his book *The Communist Postscript.*

II. Boris Groys: A Logic of Paradox

If *Hermeneutic Communism* rests upon weakness rather than strength, Groys' *Communist Postscript* places the contradictory logic of paradox over what he calls the "logical regime." (CP, xii) Boris Groys is Senior Research Fellow at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, and author of many works ranging from *The Total Art of Stalinism* (Verso, 1992), to *Art Power* (MIT Press, 2008), to the more recent *Introduction to Antiphilosophy* (Verso, 2012).

The Communist Postscript rests upon the idea that communism is "the transcription of society from the medium of money into the medium of language." (CP, xv) Given that the medium of economics is *money* (or the number), and the medium of politics is *language* (or discourse), Groys sees communism as privileging politics over economics and capitalism as putting the concerns of economics before that of politics. The concern, for Groys, is that under capitalism political dialogue is eclipsed by the commodification of discourse in the political sphere. Groys writes condemningly that "Discourses of critique and protest are recognised as successful when they sell well, and to have failed when they sell poorly. Thus in no respect can these discourses be distinguished from other commodities, which are equally silent—or speak only in self-advertisement." (CP, xvii) Rather than resigning our society to the commodification of discourse that results from capitalism, Groys argues for a practice of dissent and critique

that prizes the freedom to contradict others in the spirit of discursive exchange over the cynical imperative to "sell" an idea to the public.

For Groys, adopting the idea of communism means opening society up to critique and enabling critique in the first instance. He writes that a "Communist society can be defined as one in which power and the critique of power operate in the same medium." (CP, xviii) In this way, through the admission of the central role of language and discourse in politics, *The Communist Postscript* joins *Hermeneutic Communism* in its treatment of hermeneutics as being directly linked to human being-in-the-world. (HC, 6)

Where Groys' communist logic is concerned, the reader finds the thesis that "a paradox that conceals its paradoxical nature becomes a commodity" in the "marketplace of ideas" rather than acknowledging the reality of contradiction in discourse. (CP, 4) Groys points out Socrates' condemnation of the Sophists for composing speeches "solely for the sake of payment" and notes that the Platonic dialogues did not seek to be free of paradox. (CP, 4) Given that to contradict the statement of another is, politically speaking, to exercise one's own freedom and autonomy, then we can say that paradox and contradiction are *the* vital characteristics of discourse. Groys holds up Socrates and his method as a model for discourse because of the fact that Socrates made "paradox the basis for his own activity" and sought something beyond the untenable goal of a speech free of contradiction. (CP, 6) Groys writes of how philosophy discloses the heart of discourse and in so doing discovers that the *logos* itself is paradox, and paradox is self-contradiction. (CP, 6–7) This communist logic, in its own way, resists the same Enlightenment realism that Vattimo and Zabala resist in *Hermeneutic Communism*. However, in Groys' logic of paradox it is the philosopher who, in the spirit of Plato, has claim to power via her understanding of paradox and discourse. (CP, 10) This claim to power conflicts, at least minimally, with the commitment to weakness exhibited by Vattimo and Zabala. Where Badiou, elsewhere in his writings, may affirm the truth of the violent and revolutionary seizure of power, Groys makes an important distinction. He argues that the fascist regimes held up as examples of the failure of communism are not in the line with the spirit of communist power which seeks to be even more totalising by explicitly *not* recognising the prejudices of racism, classism, or even the friend-enemy relation. (CP, 30) Instead, the spirit and idea of communism rests upon dialogue and discourse—ideas which are truly akin to the motivations behind the democratic model.

As for the communist logic as it is presented by Groys, the second chapter of *The Communist Postscript* is titled "When Paradox Holds Power" and expounds upon the central tenets of dialectical material-

ism and its historical and scientific variants. Groys writes that the "central law of dialectical materialism is that of the unity and conflict of opposites." (CP, 33) Earlier in the work Groys defines a paradox as "simultaneously holding A and not-A in the mind as true" (CP, 16), and this definition accords with his later statement that "when contradictions have been discovered and reflected 'in spirit', they cannot be eliminated, but continue to remain active in reality." (CP, 35) Dialectical materialism, through this paradoxical and contradictory discursivity, apprehends totality in a way that is far truer than that of fascism and totalitarianism precisely because it maintains the separate and distinct identities of self and other without their violent reduction to a supposedly unified and homogenous whole. (CP, 41–43) As Groys writes, "the totality of the political field is brought into view, and one is able to act not through exclusion but through inclusion." (CP, 38)

The communist revolutionary subject, in Groys' view, is one who is defined as internally divided, heterogeneous, paradoxical, open, and not bound to mere self-identity. (CP, 96) More than this, the revolutionary subject is defined by a transformative experience of *metanoia* or "the transition from an individual subjective perspective to a general perspective, to a metaposition." (CP, 106) Groys' wide ranging examples of *metanoia* come from the conversion experiences of Christian discourse, Husserl's phenomenological reduction, McLuhan's idea of the medium as the message, the always-already of deconstruction and the truth procedure of Badiou. Most of all, *metanoia* is defined as "the renunciation of always doing the same thing, of always following the same path." (CP, 112) In the spirit of this dynamic approach to discourse and revolution, Groys writes in the conclusion of *The Communist Postscript* that "Language is more universal and more democratic than money" (CP, 126), and in the final paragraph of the book Groys holds up philosophy as the "institution that offers humans the chance to live in self-contradiction without having to hide this fact." (CP, 127) With the understanding that concealed contradiction is a property of commodities we can say that the unveiling of the contradictory core of reality is the goal of the revolutionary communist subject as described above.

III. Vattimo and Zabala: A Hermeneutic Logic

In closing we must now turn to weakness, being a primary feature of the hermeneutic logic of plurality and multiplicity. Contrasted with the strength and force of formal logic and its three laws, the communist logics of Badiou, Groys, and Vattimo and Zabala are weak logics. Despite their varying degrees of theoretical weakness, these logics op-

pose the strength of Enlightenment thinking through their refusal to fix upon reality in a way that violates its openness and flux.

While hermeneutic communism resists the asymmetrical polarities of metaphysics such as "presence vs. absence, truth vs. error, mind vs. matter, good vs. evil, man vs. woman" via Enlightenment critique (HC, 13), the communist logics outlined above deal with these polarities by a more formal means. Although Badiou's logic of the site affirms the truth of nonbeing, he does compromise the truth of paradox by ensuring that his logic remains consistent by requiring the (albeit paradoxical) presence of nonbeing to reappear in the site. Where Badiou's communist logic resolves its main contradiction (being vs. nonbeing), Groys' logic of paradox allows the aforementioned polarities (and others) to remain in tension indefinitely.

Vattimo and Zabala write that "after the deconstruction of metaphysics performed mainly by Heidegger and Derrida, it is no longer possible to impose truth without violence." (HC, 16) This impossibility is breached by every system of logic, communist or otherwise. As much as "claims of truth are claims of political power," truth claims also violate solidarity and impose themselves upon our being-in-the-world. (HC, 18–19) The violence of this imposition can be avoided in part when discourse moves beyond arguments about the polarity of truth vs. falsity, and toward the practice of hermeneutics as *techne*. (HC, 77) This practice of interpretation, avoiding claims to absolute truth or foundational values, is an affirmation of plurality and multiplicity. On the other hand, Groys' paradoxical logic is one of a totality that is unified without the violence of the fixity seen in the self-identity of the whole. These theoretical polarities can be matched up with both Vattimo and Zabala's proclamation that "Weak thought can only be the thought of the weak, certainly not of the dominating classes" (HC, 96), and Groys' desire to place the paradoxical and revolutionary subject in a position of power.

Finally, reading Vattimo and Zabala against Groys and Badiou leaves the reader with two remaining paradoxes: the One vs. the Multiple, and Power vs. Weakness. In the former case, I hope that the work of dialectics will continue between the truth of plural interpretations, and the truth of unification in the One. In the latter case, I also hope that the paradox of strength-in-weakness can be taken seriously in philosophical discourse with the acknowledgment of its theological roots in works such as John D. Caputo's *The Weakness of God* (Indiana UP, 2006) or Vattimo's joint work with Caputo *After the Death of God* (Columbia UP, 2007). In conclusion, we should hear Vattimo and Zabala's proclamation that "The moment has now arrived to *interpret* the world" as a call to complicate discourse with contradiction, a call

to open society to its ontological root in language, and a call for the critical spirit to reawaken and take power without forgetting the truth of its weakness. (HC, 140)