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Humanism Reconsidered, or: Life Living Life

Frères de l'immense histoire ! [...] Peuples de tous les temps! De tous les lieux !

Vous êtes parmi nous !

Alain Badiou¹

[...] it is linked [...] with a necessity to displace humanism. This is one of the great and profound requirements of our times.

Jean-Luc Nancy²

Humanism reconsidered³

The displacement – or even more adequately: the transformation – of humanism is an important requirement of our times.⁴ This requirement is a practical one: a demand for a specific form of praxis, a renewed praxis of thinking. But what exactly does it mean to claim that this requirement of our times is a demand for a different form of the praxis of thinking, which essentially means, a demand for *a different form of conceiving of human life*? In the first place, it means subtracting from the predominant and seemingly evident determinations of the human being its capacities and its limitations. Secondly, it means to conceive of man in a new way, to think the human being differently.⁵ For such a displacement, and

¹ Alain Badiou, *L'écharpe rouge* (Paris: Maspero, 1979), p. 108 sq.

² Jean-Luc Nancy, "Derridas Spuren. Über das Risiko und die Schrift im Herzen der Stimme, Jean-Luc Nancy im Gespräch mit Sergio Benvenuto", in: *Lettre Internationale* 70, Autumn 2005, p. 100. My translation from the German version of this interview.

³ I am grateful for comments on a draft version of this text to Sophie Ehrmantraut, Mark Potocnik, Ozren Pupovac, Tzuchien Tho, and Jan Völker.

⁴ The first results of this ongoing investigation have been published in: "Der sich selbst entfremdete und wiedergefundene Marx", edited by Helmut Lethen, Birte Löschenkohl, and Falko Schmieder, (Munich: Fink, 2009).

⁵ One contemporary predominant determination that refers to the essence of man and his capacities is that human beings are only capable of appearing in two different but interlinked forms: as communities and as individuals. This determination is one of the axioms of the ideology that

this will be my main thesis, it is nowhere else than in Marx that one finds important indications, clues, and even more: a model.⁶ My claim will therefore be that it is possible to find in Marx and retrieve from him a conception of a renewed, transformed, different humanism, of a different conception of human life. The following remarks will thus attempt to offer a new reading of the early Marx and will try to transform the traditional picture of the early humanist Marx, inasmuch as he himself, as I will endeavour to demonstrate, transformed what has been called humanism. Methodically, my remarks can be considered as a *lecture Badiouienne*, which is at the same time meant as a forced reading of the Marxian text, a *lecture forcée*.⁷ I want to note in passing that such a reading will not be preoccupied with an introduction or explanation of concepts, notions, or conceptions of Badiou's philosophy, as it will try to employ his thinking for a creative, transforming, and transformative re-construction of Marx. My reading will thus start from a question that can be addressed to what the early Marx assigns

Badiou calls "democratic materialism". See: Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes. L'être et l'événement*, 2, (Paris: Seuil, 2006), pp. 9–49.

⁶ Concerning the range of the conception of the model, see: Alain Badiou, *The Concept of the Model. An Introduction to the Materialist Epistemology of Mathematics* (Melbourne: Re-Press, 2007).

⁷ I want to remark here that the following is not intended to be a deconstruction of early Marx. I basically share Nancy's comment which provides one of the mottos of this text and that he himself rather relates to the thought of Deleuze and Derrida. But, in contrast to Nancy, I will claim that relevant indications regarding a transformation of humanism can be found precisely in the texts of that Marx which usually is considered to be humanist and that Nancy himself often treats as a dead – due to the smell of bad eschatology – dog. The following remarks rather attempt to force an "interpretation-cut" (see Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* [(Paris: Seuil, 1985] p. 14. Hereafter cited as PP) and try to pursue its consequences. There have been other contemporary attempts to relate Badiou, Marx, and the question of humanism that I would like to mention here. See, for example, the interesting investigations of Nina Power, "Marx, Feuerbach and Non-Philosophy", at: marxandphilosophy.org.uk/power2007.doc, Nina Power, "Philosophy's Subjects", in: *Parrhesia. A Journal of Critical Philosophy*, Number 3, 2007, pp. 55–72. Her reading leads in the last instance to the necessity of inscribing a minimal (or even maximal) anthropology into Badiou's thought. See: Nina Power, "Towards an Anthropology of Infinitude: Badiou and the Political Subject", in: *Cosmos and History. The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, Vol. 2, No. 1–2 (2006), *The Praxis of Alain Badiou*, pp. 186–209. This is a consequence that I reject, as, to me, it seems to be an attempt to again introduce an objective dimension into Badiou's conception of the subject, whereas Badiou's project precisely seems to start with the wager that a non-objective subjectivity can be thought – without thinking it in terms of a pure self-commencement; it has to be a subjectivity under conditions. But it is imperative to here note that a condition does not take the form of an object. For the notion of a non-objective subjectivity, see also: Alain Badiou, *Seminaire sur: Image du temps present* (2). Session of 9th October 2002, at: <http://www.entretemps.asso.fr/Badiou/02-03.3.htm>.

as one of the essential determinations of the human being. The designation is the following: Marx claims that human beings, in contrast to animals, are capable of producing universally and this form of production is precisely what makes them into human beings. The two questions I want to take as a *Leitmotif* are therefore the following: firstly, how can one conceive of this universal production? And, secondly, how can this form of production be a peculiarity of man that distinguishes him from all other species, or better: that makes him into a singular “species-being”? Giving an answer to these questions will in the end also help to display the notion of life, of human life, that is involved in the philosophy of early Marx.

Diagonal towards the Tradition, or Humanism is In-Humanism

With very little effort at formalization one can distinguish at least three traditional forms of reference to the texts of early Marx, three forms of how to posit oneself theoretically to early Marx that have all become classical. The first two take their form through a different construction and exegesis of the humanism of early Marx, which does not play such a central role in the third form of reference to Marx. I will simply call the first form of reference the *humanist reference* to Marx.⁸ Its decisive feature consists in the thesis that the truth of Marx’s thought lies entirely in his early writings. According to this position, what the later Marxian thought lacks, and what therefore constantly has to be added to it as an essential component of its truth, is precisely humanist thinking as such. This position elucidates humanist thinking by an interpretation of the Marxian conception of man as a being that is determined by a substance, a free species-being. Species-being, in fact, becomes a political slogan against the present circumstances of alienation. Against this netherworld of existing modes of production, it posits a collective organization that is rational and that leads to a free self-determination and self-realization that is adequate to human beings. The *humanist reference* therefore conceives of Marx as the theoretician of the sublation of alienation – a theorist of *Ent-Entfremdung* – which can be achieved because the constitution and disposition of human nature, of the human species-being contains all the resources and possibilities which are needed to implement it. The existing obstructions of the essence of the human being can be sublated in a

⁸ Paradigmatically one can here refer to one book of Fromm: Erich Fromm, *Marx’s Concept of Man*, (London / New York: Continuum, 2003).

properly emancipatory revolutionary action which means in the last instance that they can be reversed: human nature is not only an obstructed and distorted nature but it is also the enabling, liberating nature. The human species-being therefore becomes at the same time the motor and the origin of critique – and it seems hard to not recognize the Aristotelian subtext⁹ – as it becomes the instance of possibility from which one can think and understand what a true realization of the *causa finalis* inscribed into the substance of the human being can be. Although its realization is still hindered by the existing and established relations of society, it presents the level of a more general, historically-philosophically, and finally ontologically, secured machinery of realization and enabling. The *humanist reference* is taken up critically in the second form of reference to early Marx. The reference to the humanism of early Marx remains essential, but in this second form of reference such a conception of humanism is negated in its premises. I will therefore – in taking up its classical name – call the second form of reference *anithumanist*.¹⁰ Here as well, the essential feature in referring to young Marx is obviously his humanism. This second reference shares with the first one the reconstruction of the humanist image. But it gains its proper form principally by a specific perspective on the complete works of Marx, or to be more precise: it gains its proper form through the thesis of an epistemological break between the young and the late Marx, which is essentially read as a break with humanism, with all the ideal determinations of a seemingly pre-given essence of human beings and its *causa finalis*. Such a break is primarily a break with the philosophically secured determinations of human nature and with its functioning in the theory of a revolutionary overthrow of the present state of things. For the *anithumanist reference*, Marx becomes Marx when he moves from ideal determinations to real contradictions and this is only possible when he abandons the (proto-)substantialist, or in the last instance, Aristotelian conception of the human species-being; when he leaves humanism behind and finally advances to become the theoretician of the critique of political economy. The third form of ref-

⁹ I have to leave aside the question of whether this form of reference to Marx actually offers a correct interpretation of the Aristotelian notion of “genus”. A critical reading of early Marx that takes the interpretation of the Aristotelian “genus” as a starting point and therefore seems to remain somehow bound to the *humanist reference* to Marx is developed by Giorgio Agamben. See: Giorgio Agamben, *The Man without Content*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), pp. 68–94.

¹⁰ I am obviously thinking of the readings of Marx presented by Louis Althusser. See for example: Louis Althusser, *On the Young Marx*, in: *For Marx*, (London: Verso, 2006), pp. 49–86 and Louis Althusser, “The ‘1844 Manuscripts’ of Marx”, in: *op. cit.*, pp. 153–160, or: Louis Althusser, *Marxism and Humanism*, in: *op. cit.*, pp. 219–248.

erence understands itself in the broadest sense as fully intrinsic to the works of Marx and does not seek to gain its consistency by a necessary reference to the “concept of man” of early Marx – or to the thesis of a continuity or break with it. I want to call this third form of reference *a-humanist* because it presents itself as a more or less linear reconstruction of the development of Marx without any significant breaks. Following this position, what changes between early and late Marx is less the direction of his project than the means and instruments that he applies, for example the specific form of critique.¹¹ The *a-humanist* form of reference to young Marx attempts to establish the thesis that the seeming difference between early and late Marx is only a difference of means, concepts, and conceptions. There is neither a declaration of an indispensability of humanism for the understanding of Marx nor an implication of a necessary negation or critique of it. It is rather a certain *causa finalis* of Marx’s thought that continually, step by step, realizes itself further and further in his early and in late works, up to the point of *Capital*. My following remarks attempt to develop a diagonal to these three forms of reference. I will therefore neither claim, together with the *humanist reference*, that the young Marx subscribes to a (proto)substantialist concept of man and his *causa finalis* which one would have to sustain and even cultivate. Nor will I claim that Marx finally becomes Marx when he breaks with such an understanding and conception of what humanism is. Finally, I will also not claim that humanism does not play a central role for the philosophy¹² of early Marx. I will try to show: 1. That humanism, which can only be thought in relation to the Marxian conception of man as a species-being, plays an important role in and for the philosophy of early Marx; 2. That one can conceive of this humanism in a way that is distinct from the *humanist* and the *antihumanist reference*; 3. That humanism in early Marx can be thought in a way that can take up the *antihumanist reference* in a transformed form – in its critique of a “humanist humanism” – and I will thereby

¹¹ Although it might seem less obvious, this form of reference can be linked to quite a few names in the Marxist tradition. Here I only want to refer to the oeuvre of Ernst Bloch.

¹² I deliberately speak here of “the philosophy of early Marx”. It should become clear in what follows that in my reading it is only from a philosophical perspective that insists on the primacy of praxis that the notion of truth which I develop below can result. This perspective therefore does not limit the universal dimension (of the praxis) of politics. Rather it will be precisely the being-conditioned of philosophy by politics that renders it possible to think its specific constitution. Concerning the “philosophy of Marx” from a different, rather Spinozist perspective, see: Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx* (London: Verso, 2007). Concerning politics as a truth procedure and as a condition for philosophy, see: Alain Badiou, “Philosophie et Politique”, in: *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992) pp. 213–250.

finally claim that in this specific form of humanism of the young Marx, a political universalism can be uncovered which in no manner needs to be limited to his early works. Rather, it is in the early works of Marx that this universalism gains its original “thinkability”¹³. Accordingly, what is at stake here is neither a positivisation, nor a critique or suspension of humanism. It is rather a diagonal between these three that I will try to develop. Or to put it more precisely: what is at stake is an affirmation of a different, transformed humanism of the young Marx. I will try to extricate a humanism of impossibility – and not a humanism of the already invested and inscribed possibility of the human being. I therefore understand what follows as an *affirmative reference to the in-humanism* of the young Marx.

Alienation as Necessity. The Proletariat

The starting point of my investigation is a “structural remark” of Jacques Rancière, who, in his contribution to *Lire le Capital* – at that moment when he tries to follow the supposed necessity or contingency of the process of alienation – provides an interesting diagnosis: “Well, the problem of the origin of the alienation of labour poses itself: either alienation is an accident and we are now referred back to a problematic of the origin of the bad history, which is assimilable to that of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, or alienation is a necessary process which is inherent to the development of humanity. It is the second solution which will be chosen by Marx in the third manuscript [of the economic and philosophical manuscripts – F.R.] in which the alienation of the human essence will appear as the condition of the realization of a human world.”¹⁴ A superficial glance through the Marxian manuscripts of 1844 shows that Rancière is fully right in his reading. There Marx states clearly that alienation is precisely not a contingent fact. Rather, he describes it as a historically necessary result of the nationally-economically constituted society and its dynamics. When one at-

180

¹³ For the notion of “thinkability”, see Sylvain Lazarus, *Anthropologie du nom*, Paris 1996. Thinkability means here, as Badiou reformulates Lazarus, “an overbalancing [bascule] of what exists into what *can* exist, or from the known towards the unknown. Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London / New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 31.

¹⁴ Jacques Rancière “Le concept de critique et la critique de l’économie politique des ‘Manuscrits de 1844’ au ‘Capital’”, in: Louis Althusser / Etienne Balibar/ Roger Establet / Pierre Macherey / Jacques Rancière, *Lire le capital* (Paris: Quadrige, 1996), pp. 81–200, here: p. 103, et sq. My translation.

tempts to determine in such a structural way the place of alienation in the theory of early Marx, at first one can hence point out the following: that alienation is a historically necessary condition. The “impoverishment [*Entwesung*]”¹⁵ of the human being is necessary for the constitution of a truly human world. Consequently the supposition of alienation in Marx’s conception only makes sense if one reads it together with an effect linked to alienation. But how can one conceive of this necessity of alienation? If one remembers the insight offered by Lukacs and accepts that Marx thinks from the “standpoint of the proletariat”¹⁶, one can give a first answer. For this purpose it is also helpful to quote at length the designation which the early Marx gives to the proletariat. Marx defines the proletariat as: “the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences, but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man, and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning* of man. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*. [...] By heralding the *dissolution of the hereto existing world order*, the proletariat merely proclaims the *secret of its own existence*, for it is the factual dissolution of that world order.”¹⁷ The proletariat as a class is not a class of civil society, and as an estate it is not an estate of civil society. It is rather the factual and acute dissolution of the existing order, because it “does not by itself possess any of the properties by which the bourgeoisie defines Man”¹⁸. Or to use

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, translated by Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus, 1988), p. 134. Hereafter cited as MM plus page number. The German notion of “*Entwesung*” is here more precise than the English “impoverishment”, because it implies two semantic components: 1. a loss of essence/being (*Wesen*) and it renders 2. this loss as a process. In the following I will stick to the English translation as far as possible and will, if necessary, refer to Marx’s original terminology.

¹⁶ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972), p. 149.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, Introduction”, at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>. Hereafter cited as MC.

¹⁸ Alain Badiou, *L’hypothèse communiste. Circonstances 5* (Paris: Lignes, 2009), p. 196. My translation.

a formulation by Stathis Kouvelakis, the proletariat “confronts [...] society with its own impossibility”¹⁹. So, why is there a necessity of alienation? Man has to externalize his own essence in the development of the economic and historical process; he has to become the impossible human being to be able to become truly human. This means that all determinations of the essence of the human being have to be externalized so that a true determination of the essence of the human being becomes thinkable. For early Marx, it is necessary that the essence of man has no determination, no attribute, no property, because any determination proper to man would prevent him from producing universally.²⁰ The historical process that empties the essence of man of all determinations is necessary so as not to constantly fall back into a particularization of the universal. That is, it is necessary in order not to constantly reduce and limit the universal of human production to that which is *proper* to and particular for man. A universality which depends on determinate properties that are able to totalize the essence of man is no true universality. This is how one could render the intuition that stands behind the necessity of alienation. The adoption of the thesis of the necessary alienation in Marx should therefore be read as an intervention against any particularization of universality. But it should also be read as an attempt to develop a new, truly universal universalism. To think human essence as an essence with determinations *proper* to it would imply to understand this essence as a *proprietor* (of its own properties). This is why the national economist does not know anything of man. It is the first and fundamental form of the Marxian critique of political economy. This distance to national economy is necessary in order to avoid the inscription of any logic of (private) property into the determination of the essence of man and to come up with a limitless universal perspective of equality as a starting point. To cut a long story short: this is the attempt to begin with communism – in the double sense of this expression. To think a universal dimension of production and thereby to think a universality of whomever in the form of (constant) production (of universality and equality), one initially has to think the essence of man as indeterminate. The theory of estranged labour and alienation therewith finds its systematic place in the Marxian attempt to think a true, non-limited political universalism.

¹⁹ Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution. From Kant to Marx* (London / New York: Verso, 2003), p. 331.

²⁰ MM, p. 77.

“Un”-Equality. Equality will have been

From the claim that universality, a notion of universal equality, can be thought *in actu* – not reducing “equality as the *groundwork* of communism”²¹ to any particular attribute – one can derive the necessity to think absolute alienation, to think “the *complete loss* of man”²². At first man has to become “unessential [*Unwesen*, F.R.]”²³. Being the negation of essence, man neither has to have an essence nor does he not have one. He is a non-being [*Unwesen*] and this is what designates his constitutive indeterminacy. One can here think of the helpful distinction between three forms of judgment in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*:²⁴ The positive judgment assigns an attribute to a subject (“X is dead”); the negative judgment negates this attribution (“X is not dead”), and this is what makes it possible to translate this judgment into a positive one (“X is not dead, that is to say, X lives”). Finally, the infinite judgment assigns a non-attribute to a subject (“X is undead, that is to say, neither X lives nor X is dead”). Therewith, the infinite judgment undermines the given possibilities of distinction. But the insight into the constitutive indeterminacy of man, into the human non-being [*Unwesen*], into the void of his essence, is what is only offered with the emergence of the proletariat. With it, what becomes clear is that man will always have been a non-being [*Unwesen*].²⁵ There is no substance which is proper to him, no (determinate and determining) property that will have made him essentially into man. If one attempts to ground equality on a (constructible) determination of human essence, the universality of man is always already lost²⁶ and the talk about true equality can only remain “a mere phrase”²⁷. That is to say: Marx does not hope for de-alienation, for “*Ent-Entfremdung*”, for a

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²² MC. Marx also talks about “absolute poverty”. See: MM, p. 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 94. I here add the German “*Unwesen*”, because it is important to note that the German term “*Unwesen*” implies that the essence [*Wesen*] of man is a negation of that essence itself [*Un-wesen*] which should not be conceived of only in terms of negation, but also as an indicator of an existence.

²⁴ I adopt this argument from Slavoj Žižek. See Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London / New York: Continuum), p. 286.

²⁵ The essential temporality which is at play here is the future anterior. For this, see also Badiou’s reflections on the “true time of real politics” in: PP, p. 107.

²⁶ One would have to develop further how and why any reactionary politics grounds its thought in the principle of constructability. See also: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event* (London / New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 265–326. Hereafter cited as BE.

²⁷ MM, p. 124.

return to an “original state of paradise”²⁸ prior to alienation. This is precisely what Marx vehemently criticizes the theorists of national and political economy for. It is rather the “impoverishment [*Entwesung*]”²⁹ of man that builds the condition for the fact that the proletariat as soon as it emerges at its material site³⁰ implies an immediate dimension of universality which is addressed *to anyone*, because it is *for anyone*³¹. If man is characterized by a universal dimension, then this universality can only be truly universal if it passes into a process of universal production. The important task is thus to think together the indeterminacy which grounds the equality of anyone with anyone and the production of equality: as a production of indeterminacy. The eventual appearing of the proletariat has to be read as the inauguration of a process in which a subject that includes (principally) anyone comes to universal production (of an equality of anyone with anyone). But how does Marx think the eventual emergence of the proletariat and of universal production? Marx’s answer is strict and clear: what is needed is an “*actual [wirkliche, F.R.] communist action*”.³²

Actual Communist Action and Actual Communism

The actual communist action names an event; an eventual irruption into the structures of historical societal dynamics which lets the specific “universality of

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

³⁰ I refer here to the relation of eventual site, event, and subject in Badiou. The working class can be considered as the eventual site of the proletariat. See also: BE, pp. 104–111 and pp. 173–190. It is imperative therefore to introduce a distinction between proletariat and working class. This has often not been acknowledged in the contemporary discourse. See, for example: Ernesto Laclau, “God Only Knows”, in: *Marxism Today*, December 1991, pp. 56–59. That this distinction remains a provocation to some thinkers is explicit in Laclau’s debate with Slavoj Žižek in which Laclau, first quoting and then commenting on Žižek, claims: “‘Marx distinguishes between working class and proletariat: the working class effectively is a particular social group, while the proletariat designates a subjective position [...]’ Now, to start with, Marx *never* made such a distinction.” Ernesto Laclau, “Why Constructing a People is the Main Task of Radical Politics”, in: *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006), pp. 646–680, here: p. 659 sq. The quote from Žižek is from the following text: Slavoj Žižek, “Against the Populist Temptation”, in: *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Summer 2006), pp. 551–574.

³¹ That universalism in this regard can be understood as a universal address within a potentially infinite process becomes intelligible if one also considers it alongside Badiou’s theory of fidelity and investigation. See: BE, pp. 201–264.

³² MM, p. 123.

man”³³ appear as something that logically lies “before” (although it is always only accessible “after”) the structures of the state and of civil society. Therein Marx is in a certain sense an essentialist. But one has to remember here that the essence of man that is designated is only thinkable in the temporal mode of the future anterior, and can therefore only be thought as indeterminate, unessential. The universality will have been before the structures of the state. Through the event of an actual communist action, the impossibility of universal production under given capitalist modes of production and under the dictatorship of private property becomes an “impossible possibility”³⁴ which brings about the appearance of a new subject: the proletariat, which prior to its emergence had no determinations of existence.³⁵ The actuality, or better the effectivity – “*Wirklichkeit*” in German in the literal sense – of the communist action consists in the fact that it transforms the previous history and its laws into a history of “preparation”³⁶ by changing even the seemingly stable laws of change. One could formulate this with Badiou in the following way: what is changed by communist action is also the transcendental of change itself.³⁷ What should become clear is that actual communist action is determined by the historically necessary site of the event at which the proletariat might appear – the working class. This action is in no sense an action of pure beginning³⁸; in this sense, there is no idealism in it. As Hegel

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

³⁴ PP, p. 101.

³⁵ As Marx writes in the *Holy Family*: “But not having is not a mere category, it is a most dismal reality; today the man who has nothing is nothing, for he is cut off from existence in general, and still more from a human existence, for the condition of not having is the condition of the complete separation of man from his objectivity. Therefore, not having seems quite justified in being the highest object of thought for Proudhon...” See: Karl Marx / Friedrich Engels, “The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Criticism. Against Bruno Bauer and Company”, at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/holy-family/index.htm>.

³⁶ MM, p. 110.

³⁷ For the notion of the transcendental, see: Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes*, pp. 107-201. One could also derive from this point that the fundamental antagonism is not between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, but between the proletariat and the bourgeois “world” and its transcendental (of change). For this, see also: Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject* (London / New York: Continuum, 2009), p. 7.

³⁸ What should be completely clear here is that there is no decisionist aspect implied in communist action. Neither Marx nor Badiou are Schmittians. It is rather that the communist action itself could be described as voluntarist in the sense of Peter Hallward. See: Peter Hallward, “The Will of the People. Notes towards a Dialectical Voluntarism”, in: *Radical Philosophy* 155 (May/June 2009), pp. 17–22.

already made clear in his *Philosophy of Right* from 1830, poverty is a necessary and not at all contingent product of the movement of civil society.³⁹ Poverty is and subsists, as the young Hegel once put it, in the “impossibility to bring something in front of oneself”⁴⁰. For Hegel, civil society permanently produces the impossibility that its own principle – namely that everyone realizes his own freedom by earning his own subsistence by his own labour – is realizable by everyone. This moment is linked to the insight that if poverty is a necessary product of civil society, it means that anyone can become poor, which implies that anyone is latently poor.⁴¹ With Marx it is also that the emergence of the proletariat can only happen if there is a necessarily produced condition – the poverty of the working class which is the (logical) site of its appearance – by communist action. The working class presents the material condition of the eventual emergence of the proletariat and is therefore not identical with it.⁴² It is a strictly localized, even more, local but at the same time immediately universal action. It is therefore singular – localized – and universal because the proletariat concerns everyone, since

³⁹ See G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (*Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought*) (Cambridge, 1991), p. 265 sq.

⁴⁰ G.W.F. Hegel, *Jenaer Realphilosophie. Vorlesungsmanuskripte zur Philosophie der Natur und des Geistes von 1805–1806*, Hamburg 1986, p. 232. My translation. The German version of this definition is that poverty is “die Unmöglichkeit, etwas vor sich zu bringen”.

⁴¹ Here, in order to fully grasp the transition from Hegel to Marx from this reframed perspective, it is imperative to highlight the relation between what Hegel in his *Philosophy of Right* calls the “rabble” and the Marxian proletariat. In Hegel this formula then takes the following form: Everyone will have been latently poor and will have been latently “rabble”. I presented a first attempt to understand this relation elsewhere: See: Frank Ruda, *Hegels Pöbel. Eine Untersuchung der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie [Hegel's Rabble. An Investigation of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right]*, Dissertation (unpublished).

⁴² There are, as already noted, many adjustments to the distinction between working class and proletariat. Badiou formulates this insight clearly when stating, concerning “vulgar-Marxism”, that: “it thought the working class as the mass of workers. Naturally, ‘the workers’, in terms of pure multiples, formed an infinite class; it was not the sum total of empirical workers that was at stake. Yet this did not prevent knowledge (and paradoxically Marxist knowledge itself) from being for ever able to consider ‘the workers’ as falling under an encyclopedic determinant (sociological, economical, etc.)” BE, p. 334. The distinction between working class and proletariat in this sense is essential to not too hastily misjudge the Marxian conception. In Badiou’s terminology, one would have to say that the working class in the historical situation exists at “the edge of the void” and therefore is presented but not represented: the elements it is composed of do not exist in the given situation. The proletariat in this sense is one of its elements that is not counted in the situation and therefore does not appear in it: a name that is drawn from the void with which, following Badiou, any situation is sutured.

everyone will have been latently poor and latently proletarian. If there is an eventual irruption of a truly communist action and if this action brings the proletariat into existence, then here the question arises of how the young Marx develops the process of universal production which structurally follows the event.

Somersault. Universal Production and the Production of Universality

How does Marx elucidate what he himself calls universal production? How does he elucidate that which is only thinkable 1. under the condition of a radical alienation of all essential determinations of man and 2. if and only if a true communist action eventually breaks the existing historical situation into two, and even changes the laws of change, and which finally, 3. depends of the subject-proletariat that initially defines the agent of the true communist action and in consequence defines the subject of the process of universal production? How does Marx therefore meet the claim to think a universality which introduces an equality of anybody but which is at the same time essentially bound to the *production* of this equality? What gets introduced by true communist action is the procedural deployment of a subject which Marx describes as man's active "*species-life*"⁴³. One direct result of this is that to conceive of a process in which a universally producing life of the species emerges, one has to avoid any reference to anthropological categories and determinations. It is rather in this process that "truly *ontological* affirmations of essential being"⁴⁴ take place. Only in this process, "the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase [...] but a truth"⁴⁵. In its process universal production leads to ontological affirmations of the (fully indeterminate) nature of man which deploys the equality of anyone – the brotherhood of man – as a truth.⁴⁶ But how can one understand this seemingly opaque formula? To start one can note that the process of universal production is immanently linked to what Marx calls "a truth" and that this truth is also immanently related to ontological affirmations of an essence. Universal production is firstly

⁴³ This expression in German is "*werktätiges Gattungsleben*", which at the same time implies an activity and the creation of a material work. See MM, p. 162.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 124. The English translation does not render the German "*Wahrheit*" as "truth" but as "fact of life", I therefore modified the translation.

⁴⁶ As also Alain Badiou claims: "Truths are eternal because they have been created, not because they have been there since forever." See Alain Badiou, *Séminaire sur: S'orienter dans la pensée, s'orienter dans l'existence (2)*. Session of October 19, 2005. My translation.

a production of truth, which itself has an ontological dimension. If one now tries to bring together this first and still abstract definition of the process of universal production and the necessarily indeterminate essence of man which emerges as an effect of the actual communist action, a consequence becomes clear: the universal production which affirms the essence of man has to itself preserve the indeterminacy of this essence in the process of production. If it does not do so, it will not have been a true affirmation of human essence. But, how to imagine a production that is at the same time able to preserve the constitutive indeterminacy of the human essence? Or to begin with a slightly different question: If Marx implies that these ontological affirmations of essence in the active species-life are related to what he calls man as “species-being”⁴⁷, how can one understand this species-being that is affirmed only in universal production? One can offer an answer to these questions if one focuses in greater detail on the operation of universal production. An example that Marx offers is quite helpful in this context: “just as music alone awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear – is no object for it because my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers [...] for the same reasons, the senses of social man are other senses than those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form, in short, sense capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being.”⁴⁸ If one reads Marx’s exemplary considerations as an analysis of the structure of universal production, things become clearer. What happens in the process of universal production – in this process that logically begins after the actual communist action – is that a constitutively indeterminate human (collective) subject cultivates “social organs”⁴⁹ that themselves retroactively determine the essence of the human being. The invention of music signifies a retroactively occurring determination of man who will have had a musical ear. Universal production is therefore on the one hand a production of determinations of the human being that become objective and actual. These determinations are objective because they change the constitution of the essence of man in a way that they will forever have changed this essence. But this process can, on the other hand, be fully grasped only if it is

⁴⁷ MM, p. 102.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

considered in its proper temporality. For the retroactive determination of man in the process of universal production, or to put it differently: the determination of that which will have been human, cannot refer back to any given determinations of the human essence. It only results *retroactively and in the process* of its determination. For this reason, the temporality of universal production is the *future anterior*. The determination of the “unessential [*Unwesen*]”⁵⁰ that is man is therefore no longer bound to a predetermined possibility of humanity which would realize itself in this process of production. This process itself continually retroactively creates the conditions of its own possibility. This is why Marx can claim that “communism [...] as such is not the goal of human development”⁵¹, because the process of universal production as emerging after the communist action cannot, due to its inherent logic, know any goal. Rather this process is *in actu*, i.e. it is actual or it is not. Therefore: communism is *in actu* or it is not.⁵² If one begins with the assumption that there is no essence of man which could be realized in the process of production, or to state it even more clearly: if one begins with the claim that the human being is constitutively indeterminate, then this leads to the consequence that this process of determination – whose name is “universal production” – can have no immanent boundaries, no inherent limitations. It rather has to be understood as – at least potentially – infinite. The process of universal production therefore proceeds via a constant conversion into “impossible possibilities”⁵³ of that which seems to be impossible for man to do or to think. Things seem to be impossible for the human being: 1. because it bears no determinations of what is possible for it and 2. because it is always inscribed into concrete social historical and political situations that present something as an impossibility, as historically impossible. These two dimensions of impossibility – the abstract and the concrete – are converted into impossible possibilities that refer to what will have been possible for man. Against the “fraternization of impossibilities”⁵⁴, Marx emphasizes the conversion of the impossibility of fraternization into its possibility. To relate once again to Marx’s example: if it seems

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵² What should be clear at this point is that Marx uses the word “communism” not in the sense of expressions like “communist party”, “communist state” – which to me seems to be a *contradictio in adjecto*. It here can be understood in a purely negative way: the logic of classes, the logic of the oppression of one class by another can be overcome. For this, see also: Alain Badiou, *De Quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?* (Paris: Lignes, 2007), p. 130 sq.

⁵³ PP, p. 101.

⁵⁴ MM, p. 138.

impossible prior to the invention of music that man has or can have a musical ear, what happens with the invention of music is that a new organ is born, or to cut a long story short: this specific impossibility is converted into a possibility that has to be thought in the temporality of the future anterior. One can therefore also claim that the proletariat as a subject of universal production continually determines itself retroactively as that which it will have been. It is a constant “being-by-itself”⁵⁵ in the steady production of the retroactive determinations of new social organs of its own universal essence. The proletariat is the subject of this process of universal production, and what is produced by it is the universality that Marx calls “species-being”⁵⁶. This also means that there can be no condition of belonging which would regulate who can and who cannot participate in the process of universal production.⁵⁷ Rather it is in this process that there is “a moment in which it fraternizes [...] with society in general”⁵⁸. In a different context Marx offers an image that is helpful for an understanding of the logic of this operation. The movement of universal production whose subject is the proletariat is similar to a constant “*somersault*, not only over its own limitations, but at the same time over the limitations of the modern nations”⁵⁹. The somersault movement makes it possible that the process of universal production knows no boundaries or limitations: as universal production itself, it is at the same time a retroactive production of universality. Step by step, or better: somersault by somersault, without any law of production, without any regulation of how it proceeds and without any prior determination, in always singular historical situations, one determination after another is produced that retroactively deploys the universal dimension of the human species-being. The species-being is constitutively indeterminate and it is precisely due to the potential infinity of its connected determinations – this somersault after somersault retroactively change the essence itself – that it remains indeterminate. For the process neither allows a law of op-

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112. I modified the translation because the sense of the German expression *Durchsichselbstsein* which Marx employs here, literally means to be the cause of one’s own being. This precise sense gets lost if one translates it as “self-mediated being”.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁵⁷ This thought is what still seems to be one, rarely noticed, aspect of the Marxian heritage in contemporary political and philosophical thinking. Thinkers as different as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek all seem to have this one thing in common: the enterprise to think a form of togetherness or of organisation which does not and cannot know any exclusive conditions of belonging to it.

⁵⁸ MC, p. 105.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

eration, a defined condition of belonging to it, nor a point at which the realization of the humanly possible would be reached. This sort of production is rather marked by what I would like to call an immanent *Bestimmbarkeit*.⁶⁰ On the one hand, the essence of man is without any determination, because it is stripped of all determinations by the existing forms of alienation. On the other hand, what universal production designates is a process of production that – in always singular historical situations – generates step by step certain determinations which retroactively always determine the ever new species being. This means that the essence of man is and will always be a non-being [*Unwesen*]. Due to the internal infinity of the process there can be no substantialisation, no essentialisation of any determination. This is the reason why the universal production (of the proletariat) and the production of the universal (of the human species being) is and remains *bestimmbar*. It is such a production of universality by a local and always singular subject that Alain Badiou called a “proletarian aristocratism”.⁶¹ It is proletarian because the notion of truth that comes into play here can only be thought in the realm of production. And it is aristocratic because this production is actualized by something that always appears at first as a minority⁶², as something in-existent. It is consequently aristocratic because only a historically localized singular subject (the proletariat) can introduce an exception to that which the

⁶⁰ This term is not translatable into English and its precise sense would be lost if rendered as “determinability”. This is because “*Bestimmbarkeit*” should be read in two ways: something can constantly be determined because it is stripped of all determinations (it is “*bar aller Bestimmungen*”, as one could put it in German) and produces this double condition also constantly as any retroactive determination changes the basis that it determines. The “*bar*” of “*Bestimmbarkeit*” therefore stands for the continuous condition of the emergence of new determinations that are produced retroactively. This is also how I read some central aspects of what Badiou calls “subtraction”. See Alain Badiou, *Conférence sur la soustraction*, in: *Conditions*, pp. 179–192.

⁶¹ Alain Badiou, “Manifesto of Affirmationism”, in: *Lacanian Ink* 24 (<http://www.lacan.com/frameXXIV5.htm>). I modified the translation.

⁶² That minority does not imply that particularity should be clear here. “Minority” is rather used in a Deleuzian sense of the term. If in the Marxian conception the proletariat is an objective bearer of heterogeneity that today seems to be lacking, then it is precisely at this point that one can raise the question of the range of what Badiou calls the first and second sequence of the communist hypothesis. Any renewal of the critique of political economy necessarily has to answer to this demand to not fall back into a thinking that understands politics as a subjectivation of objectively given economic contradictions. If this demand is not met, political thinking will remain in the realm of what Badiou calls the state. See: Alain Badiou, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*, pp. 129–155; Alain Badiou, *L’hypothèse communiste. Circonstances* 5, pp. 85–133.

given situation declares as possible and impossible. This sort of exception is *hic et nunc* universal because it directly leads to the production of universality. It is consequently proletarian because the process itself is a synthesis of singularity and universality and it contains a dimension that is addressed to everyone. This is why in the process of universal production brotherhood is no longer a phrase but a truth. As Alain Badiou puts it: “You know that Marx names ‘generic humanity’ humanity in the movement of its own emancipation; and ‘proletariat’, the name ‘proletariat’ is the name of the possibility of generic humanity in an affirmative form. ‘Generic’ names for Marx the becoming of the universality of human beings, and the proletarian historical function is to deliver the generic form of the human being. So Marx’ political truth is on the side of genericity, and never on the side of particularity. It’s formally a matter of desire, creation or invention, and not a matter of law, necessity or conservation.”⁶³ Marx’s humanism is a humanism of the impossible; an inhumanism of a collective production of formerly unthinkable possibilities. This is why one can claim that it is precisely the “inhuman ordering humanity to be in excess over its being-there”⁶⁴.

Coda: Life Living Life

Man truly lives if and only if this excess is engendered by an actual communist action that leads to the process of affirmation of the ontological determinations of its indeterminate essence. From what I have developed so far, one can draw some conclusions concerning the notion of life that is implied here. Only in the deployment of his universal species-being does man begin his true “*life of the species*”.⁶⁵ When Marx thereby defines universal production also as the life of the species, it is because this production implies a conception of life which is a “*productive life*”⁶⁶. What universal production produces is thus the universal dimension of the human species-being. In the process of deploying the truth of this

⁶³ Alain Badiou, “Politics. A Non-expressive Dialectics”, Typescript. One should bear in mind here that *humanité générique* is the French translation of the Marxian notion of “species-being”. When re-translated from French into English “species-being” becomes “generic humanity”. My reading attempts to show that the “generic” aspect of species-being – in the Badiouian sense of the term – is not just a coincidence of translation but rather a fundamental characteristic of the Marxian conception.

⁶⁴ See Alain Badiou, *Séminaire sur: S’orienter dans la pensée, s’orienter dans l’existence (2)*. Session of October 19, 2005. My translation.

⁶⁵ MM, p. 76.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

species-being the true species-life of man appears, which includes everyone. Consequently, man lives if and only if he participates in the deployment of his own universality, if he works for the ontological affirmation of his own essence. It is because this production constantly creates retroactive determinations of its own essence that one can claim that this *universally producing* life is as well constantly relating itself to itself, i.e. in the process of living truly, life produces determinations of itself. For Marx, to truly think human species-life signifies to think a collective universal production that itself generates life. “[W]hat is life other than activity”⁶⁷ – other than universal production? If to truly live means to produce universally, to produce the universality of one’s own essence, then life = praxis = activity. This is why true activity, i.e. universal production, is true life, i.e. the permanent creation of one’s own universality. If true life is constitutively universal active life and if therefore life can be said to be creative life, one can conclude that productive life defines a life which in its activity constantly refers back to itself. For Marx, true life is universal activity and universal activity is true life. One can now easily inscribe these interdependent definitions into Marx’s formula of “productive life”: Marx’s conception of human species-life, the life of generic humanity, can be understood as a conception of a *life living life*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.