

**WHY ALAIN  
BADIOU IS A  
ROUSSEAUIST...  
AND WHY WE  
SHOULD NOT BE**

**DRAFT: NOT FOR PUBLICATION OR CITATION**

**NOTE TO READER**

**This is a draft chapter from a polemic against Alain Badiou. The full polemic will be published in the first issue of an on-line theoretical journal promoting the perspectives of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA. A version of this chapter will be available the week of March 18<sup>th</sup> at [revcom.us](http://revcom.us).**

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## WHY ALAIN BADIOU IS A ROUSSEAUIST...

### AND WHY WE SHOULD NOT BE

This draft chapter is part of a larger polemic containing these chapters:

\* A materialist critique of Badiou's approach to state and leadership, in particular his rejection of the "party-state" paradigm—the dictatorship of the proletariat and the leading role of the communist party in the revolutionary process and how this serves his operative conclusion that the "age of revolutions is over."<sup>1</sup> Why his concept of politics "at a distance from the State" is illusory.

\* A detailed critique of Badiou's reading of the Cultural Revolution, clarifying its actual aims and accomplishments, its real problems and shortcomings, and the correct and incorrect lessons to be drawn from the Cultural Revolution.

\* A demonstration that Badiou's theorization of the "event" in the political realm does not lead to a real rupture, and begets a politics of passivity and subordination to the bourgeoisie, and observations on philosophy in relation to this.

The chapter that follows dissects Badiou's "politics of equality" and its anchoring in bourgeois-democratic principles. We welcome comments.

### A COMMENT ON THE HISTORICAL MOMENT

Communism, and the communist project, is at a crossroads.

With the restoration of capitalism in China in 1976, the first wave of socialist revolutions and societies that began with the short-lived Paris Commune in 1871 and the Russian revolution in 1917 has come to an end. The end of the first stage, with extensive changes in the world, has posed questions, tasks, and world-historic challenges for the communist movement, and others who consider themselves broadly supportive of this project of human emancipation.

What are the correct and incorrect lessons to be drawn from the rich experience of this first wave of socialist revolutions? What is the framework for the new stage of communism, for going forward in this project for the emancipation of humanity? Is Marxism, communism, still valid as a science? In the most fundamental sense, the question comes down to this: can you make revolution in today's world, a genuinely emancipating communist revolution—or is that not possible, or even desirable, anymore?

As described in *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*<sup>2</sup> there are three main and essential responses to this moment.

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<sup>1</sup> Cited in Peter Hallward, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p 226

<sup>2</sup> Published September 2008, available at [revcom.us](http://revcom.us).

First, there are those who religiously cling to the experience and theory of the first wave of socialist revolution of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—not summing up problems and shortcomings, not moving forward, but circling the wagons.

Second, there are those who reject real scientific analysis of the contradictions of the socialist transition and distance themselves from the unprecedented breakthroughs in human emancipation represented by the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions. They look for inspiration and orientation even further back into the past—to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the proclaimed democratic and egalitarian ideals and social models of the bourgeois epoch and to theorists like Rousseau, Kant, and Jefferson. In some cases, they discard the very term communism; in other cases, they affix the label “communism” to a political project that situates itself firmly within the bounds of bourgeois-democratic principles.

Third, there is what Bob Avakian has been doing. He is not only the leader of the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA, which has its sights set on the revolutionary seizure of power and the radical transformation of society, but is also a visionary theorist. Since the defeat of the Chinese revolution in 1976, he has been applying himself to the challenges of making revolution in today’s world, acting on the understanding that communist revolution is the only way out of the madness and horror that is social existence on this planet.

Bob Avakian has been “learning from the rich historical experience since the time of Marx, upholding the fundamental objectives and principles of communism, which have been shown to be fundamentally correct, criticizing and discarding aspects that have been shown to be incorrect, or no longer applicable, and establishing communism even more fully and firmly on a scientific foundation.”<sup>3</sup> He has defended from reactionary assault and upheld the extraordinary breakthroughs of the Russian Revolution (1917-56) and the Chinese Revolution (1949-76). For Avakian, while there is principally continuity with the first wave of socialist revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, whose high water mark was the Cultural Revolution, there is also rupture with wrong conceptions and methodology.

On the basis of this approach, Bob Avakian has forged a new synthesis comprehending path-breaking developments in the realms of philosophy and method, internationalism, the character of the socialist transition to communism, and in the strategic approach to revolution. As a qualitative development in the science of communism, the synthesis “embodies a continuation of Mao’s ruptures with Stalin but also in some aspects a rupture beyond the ways in which Mao himself was influenced, even though secondarily, by what had become the dominant mode of thinking in the communist movement under the leadership of Stalin.”<sup>4</sup>

The political project of Alain Badiou is a concentrated expression of the second pole identified here: the retreat to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This philosophical-political retreat is very much bound up with the challenges and difficulties thrown up by the defeat of this first wave of proletarian revolution in 1976—entraining a period that could perhaps best be described as 30 years of counterrevolution. At the same time, this retreat is reinforced by and comes packaged with garden-variety anticommunist verdicts and spurious “anti-totalitarian” discourse about the experience of socialist revolution in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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<sup>3</sup> *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage, A Manifesto from the Revolutionary Communist Party, USA*, revcom.us; to be hereafter cited as *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*

<sup>4</sup> *Communism: The Beginning of a New Stage*

A crucial element of Bob Avakian's new synthesis is communism's further rupture with bourgeois democracy and a more scientific critique of democracy and democratic theory. This is highly relevant both to the historical moment and to our polemic against Alain Badiou.

Avakian has excavated unscientific notions of pure and classless and ever-perfectible democracy. In major critiques of liberal democratic theory, he has examined Rousseau, Locke, Jefferson, among others, including contemporary "antitotalitarian" theorists, like Hannah Arendt. At the same time, Avakian has identified problems in the international communist movement since its origins, secondary though at times quite pronounced, in not drawing a clear enough demarcation between communist and bourgeois-democratic principles. Through all of this, Avakian has been bringing forward a new and deeper understanding of the radically different state represented by the dictatorship of the proletariat and a truly emancipating vision of communism.

In framing this polemic, and in developing its arguments, we have drawn extensively from Bob Avakian's work<sup>5</sup>.

The real-world contradictions confronting humanity and the real-world complexity of making revolution and transforming the world cannot be underestimated. Alain Badiou's theoretical enterprise neither engages these real-world challenges nor proceeds from the need for revolution. Yet the world cries out for revolution. These are times demanding clarity, and that clarity exists: Bob Avakian's reenvisioned communism provides the critical compass points to go forward.

Alain Badiou's ideas are both influential and harmful. Alain Badiou is bringing forward a politics adorned with the label of "emancipation" and "communism" that have nothing to do with either, and in fact lead away from revolution.

His is a communism acceptable to the bourgeoisie.

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## CHAPTER 1: WHY ALAIN BADIOU IS A ROUSSEAUIST...AND WHY WE SHOULD NOT BE

### I. INTRODUCTION: TWO DIFFERENT FRAMEWORKS AND TWO DIFFERENT PROJECTS

Equality is a first principle, an axiom, in Alain Badiou's politics of emancipation. He has stated: "the philosophical embrace of emancipatory politics is to be carried out through the name of a radical politics of equality,"<sup>6</sup> the "egalitarian maxim [is] proper to every politics of

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<sup>5</sup> Avakian's critical explorations of bourgeois democratic theory and his theorization of the need for communism to more fully and deeply rupture with democracy are addressed in pivotal works that include *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 1981); the polemic titled "*Democracy: More Than Ever We Can and Must Do Better Than That*" which appears as an Appendix to the book *Phony Communism Is Dead...Long Live Real Communism!*, 2nd edition, by Bob Avakian (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2004); *Democracy: Can't We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986); *Communism and Jeffersonian Democracy* (Chicago: RCP Publications, 2008); *The Basis, The Goals, and the Methods of Communist Revolution* (revcom.us); and *Views on Socialism and Communism: A Radically New Kind of State, A Radically Different and Far Greater Vision of Freedom* (revcom.us).

In writings on the international communist movement, including *Conquer the World? The International Proletariat Must and Will* Bob Avakian has pointed to tendencies in the international communist movement to view the communist revolution as the true upholder of democracy, which was especially pronounced during the Stalin period with political orientations such as the "united front against fascism."

<sup>6</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, (London: Continuum, 2008), p 173

emancipation<sup>7</sup>.” He has enshrined equality as “the principle of principles.<sup>8</sup>” In one of his observations, Badiou has noted:

Equality neither presumes closure, nor qualifies the terms it embraces, nor prescribes a territory for its exercise. Equality is immediately prescriptive, and the current resolve to denounce its utopian character is a good sign, a sign that the word has recovered its force of rupture.<sup>9</sup>”

He has gone further still, and redefined communism as any popular struggle for equality, in any historical period, against state coercion. Here is Badiou in “The Communist Invariant”:

“‘Communism’ ... is what Kant called an Idea, with a regulatory function, rather than a programme. *As a pure Idea of equality, the communist hypothesis has no doubt existed since the beginnings of the state.* As soon as mass action opposes state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice, rudiments or fragments of the hypothesis start to appear. Popular revolts—the slaves led by Spartacus, the peasants led by Müntzer—might be identified as practical examples of this ‘communist invariant’.<sup>10</sup>”

By attempting to redefine communism in this way, Badiou is setting out to accomplish two things. Or, to put it differently, there is an ideological-political package that he is putting together.

*First*, Badiou places the demand and prescription for equality at the core of the communist project and his regulating idea. The “problem” in human society is thus the condition of inequality; the “solution,” the essence of communism, as Badiou sees it, resides in the quest for equality as “immediate prescription” and “axiom of action.”

But real communism is something far different, far more radical, and far loftier than equality. Here is Marx describing the content and goal of communism, and distinguishing it from utopian and ultimately reformist socialism. Communism:

“Is the *declaration of the permanence of revolution, the class dictatorship of the proletariat as the necessary transit point to the abolition of class distinctions generally, the abolition of all the relations of production on which they rest, to the abolition of all the social relations that correspond to these relations of production, to the revolutionizing of all the ideas that result from these social relations.*<sup>11</sup>”

Consider what Marx is getting at in this vision of overcoming the “4 Alls.” The communist revolution involves the transformation of people and their thinking, and requires the most radical transformation of economic, political, and social relations and institutions. This revolution is aimed not at attenuating the extremes of polarization but overcoming all forms of exploitation and abolishing classes.

This is a “total revolution,” although not in a utopian sense. The material and social development of human society has created the basis for a revolution wholly

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<sup>7</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics* (London: Verso, 2005), p 149

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, (London: Verso 2006), pp. 96

<sup>9</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, (London: Continuum, 2008), p 173

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, *New Left Review* 49, January-February 2008

<sup>11</sup> Karl Marx, *The Class Struggles in France, 1848-1850*, MESW, Vol 1. p. 282

unprecedented in human history: to create a world society of freely-associating human beings who are consciously and voluntarily changing the world and changing themselves.

*Second*, in reconceiving communism as a Kantian regulative idea, he is emptying communism of science and the revolutionary political movement based on that science. He erases the specificity of communism in two senses: the historical and social conditions underlying its emergence, and the actual liberatory content of this revolution. There is, rather, a transhistorical regulative idea of equality.

The communist program flows from the reality of the world we live in and the world we could live in. This requires the continuous development and application of communist science, and a thoroughly scientific method and approach, that seeks to *know and transform reality to bring about a far better world*, a classless society without exploitation, oppression or social antagonism.

Badiou's concept of communism as a "regulative idea" versus communism as a science (and how it is a science) will be addressed in a subsequent chapter.

Here we focus on equality. Has Alain Badiou captured the essence of communism with his "pure idea of equality?" No. Is this a creative development that possibly enriches the concept of communism? No again. What we will see is that this is not the "communist invariant"...but communism as a variant of bourgeois democracy.

## II. STAYING WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF EQUALITY, OR MOVING BEYOND THE NARROW HORIZON OF BOURGEOIS RIGHT?

At first glance, and this is part of Alain Badiou's appeal, he seems to be pulling the lens back in calling for "mass action oppos[ing] state coercion in the name of egalitarian justice", a radical politics of equality that guides historic and righteous rebellions against the state. Shouldn't emancipation be about achieving equality, and shouldn't equality be "immediately prescriptive"?

Overcoming inequality plays a crucial role in relation to achieving these "4 Alls." The deep-rooted inequalities of modern bourgeois society include those of class division, the division between mental and manual labor, between men and women, relations between dominant and minority nationalities, and between town and country, among other key contradictions and divisions.

But equality is not a free-standing principle. As a concrete social relation or as a political-philosophical category, equality has a class character and is historically limited. It is generally linked with the economic relations and political institutions of the bourgeois epoch.

Further, as we will show, to pursue equality as an end itself will not lead to emancipation: *It will not strike at the relations of exploitation and the division of society into exploiter and exploiting classes that is the taproot of inequality.*

In overcoming inequality, the communist revolution actually moves beyond equality (and democracy); indeed, in communist society, equality ceases to have meaning.

## 1). ROUSSEAU AS A THINKER OF THE BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION

Alain Badiou's axiomatic approach to equality finds its roots in and marks a return to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, to the constructs of Jean Jacques Rousseau<sup>12</sup> and the ideals of the French Revolution of 1789. Here is an excerpt from a "Meditation" on Rousseau in Badiou's influential work *Being and Event*:

Rousseau's *acuity extends to his perception that the norm of general will is equality.*

This is a fundamental point. General will is a relationship of co-belonging of the people to itself. It is therefore only effective from all the people to all the people. Its forms of manifestation – laws- are: 'a relation ... between the entire object from one point of view and the entire object from another point of view, with no division of the whole.'  
(emphasis ours)

.... Rousseau thinks the essential modern link between the existence of politics and the egalitarian norm. Yet it is not quite exact to speak of a norm. As an intrinsic qualification of general will, equality is politics, such that a contrario, any in-egalitarian statement, whatever it be, is anti-political. The most remarkable thing about the *Social Contract* is that it establishes an intimate connection between politics and equality by an articulated recourse to an eventual foundation and a procedure of the indiscernible<sup>13</sup>.

Equality *qua* equality is the ultimate standard of Badiou's politics of emancipation, with the Rousseau-ian "egalitarian maxim" as central and defining. Let's examine this more closely and unpack some critical aspects of Badiou's return to Rousseau.

First, one has to ask, is it possible, as Badiou does, to speak of society, or the will of society, with "no division of the whole?" Can there be an undivided whole on a planet in which billions are exploited and dispossessed and in thrall to those relative few who control the means of production and enforce that control with arsenals of war and destruction?

The fact is that with the historical development of the capacity of human society to produce a social surplus (more than is needed for basic subsistence and the reproduction of society at a level of basic subsistence) and with the associated separation of mental from manual labor and emergence of patriarchy and private property, human society has been divided into antagonistic classes.

This is not to say there is no cohesiveness to society. There is, and it is grounded in the character and regulating mechanisms of the dominant mode of production and in the position occupied and role played by different social groups in the process of social production. But this social whole is riven by social division and antagonism: between exploiters and exploited, and dominators and dominated. This whole could not "stay whole," as it were, without social institutions and relations, and values and ideas, along with the "force of habit," that act as a kind of "social glue." Decisively, this whole could not "stay whole" absent the repressive force of state power concentrating and safeguarding the interests of the economically dominant class in society.

Rousseau's view of equality was bound up with private property—indeed, Rousseau's *Social Contract* was a guarantor of private property. Rousseau's vision of an egalitarian society was premised on the petty producer of commodities as self-sufficient and self-determining, each with

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<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-78) was a political philosopher whose writings, such as *The Social Contract* and *A Discourse Upon the Origin and Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, profoundly influenced the ideologues of the French, American, and other bourgeois revolutions. His thinking continues to exert influence on contemporary political thought.

<sup>13</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, (London: Continuum, 2007), p 347

commensurate means of production in a small city-state-type community whose basic cell was the *patriarchal* household. Moreover, Rousseau saw his local republic as an organic, *patriotic* community of equals. Patriotism and patriarchy—have we not seen enough of this? In class terms, Rousseau was a petty bourgeois republican. Badiou knows all of this, but the “maxim of equality” trumps all.

The forms and content of equality in bourgeois society correspond to a certain mode of production, capitalism, based on commodity production and the interactions it engenders; private ownership; production for profit not need; and exploitation of wage-labor. Commodity production is governed by the exchange of equivalents, the measure of the labor time socially necessary to produce these commodities, that is, by an equal standard.

The capitalist mode of production generalizes commodity relations, central to which is the transformation of labor power into a commodity to be bought and sold. The laborer is free in a double sense: freed of means of production, and free to be exploited by this or that capitalist.

In *Capital*, Marx analyzes the forging of the modern proletariat and its historical basis in the *violent* separation of the producers from the means of production: mass uprooting, expulsion, draconian enforcement of decree, punishment and coercion. The condition of wage-slavery is one in which the producer is compelled to sell his or her labor power on the continuing basis of the separation from the means of production.

The most fundamental exchange that takes place under capitalism is the exchange of labor power according to its value (the cost of maintaining and reproducing labor power) for wages and the use of this labor power, its exploitation, by capital in the sphere of production yielding value in excess of wages (again, the costs of maintaining and reproducing this labor power). This is the “dirty little secret” of capitalist production. The production of surplus value based on the exploitation of wage labor is at the heart of capitalism. But this is disguised--it occurs through the exchange of equivalents and is masked by juridical (formal) equality.

Rousseau’s “revolutionary idea” of equality and democracy is rooted in a profound transformation in production and class relations that takes place with the rise and development of capitalism.

Alain Badiou wants to bracket all of this. He wants to detach Rousseau’s vision of equality from the social and class relations out of which it arose. He wants to detach this vision from the bourgeois relations to which it gave ideological impetus. On this basis, he extracts from Rousseau a political model of equality “free of any economic connotation<sup>14</sup>.”

#### SOCIAL CONTRACT OR BOURGEOIS SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

Rousseau’s Social Contract posits a consensual view of the state: the modern (bourgeois) democratic state and civil society originate in a willing accord, a social pact into which people enter in order to constitute a specific kind of “co-belonging.”

The problem is that Rousseau’s idyll of the “social contract” does not correspond to how states, even the most democratic state of the bourgeois epoch, historically evolved--or why states continue to exist. The state is not an institutional expression of a “social contract,” embodying and guaranteeing the “general will.” Rather, in its essence, the state is “the machine for the suppression of one class by another” and the maintenance and reproduction of the existing social order. Nothing in the historical and continuing development of capitalist society or in the

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<sup>14</sup> Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, (London: Continuum, 2008), p 173



institutional evolution of the capitalist state and its mechanisms of legitimation has altered this core relation of class domination and suppression.

Rousseau was articulating the interests of the rising bourgeois class and was bringing forward an ideal vision of state and society that served this rising class and the consolidation of the capitalist mode of production. It fired the imaginations of the more radical ideologues of the French revolution. Key to this was the idea of a free collectivity—a republican social organism made up of citizens whose freedom lay in the shared establishment of and obedience to a general will—concentrated in laws.

In the eyes of the ideologues of the bourgeois revolution, one of the main ways in which the old feudal order lacked legitimacy was the absence of popular sovereignty--no general will based on society, that is, emergent bourgeois society and its social-political representatives having a direct share in creating the laws and norms of society. This was taken up by the French revolutionaries as a rallying cry to smash the old and to create and legislate the new.

Here is Badiou: “Rousseau’s acuity extends to his perception that the norm of general will is equality. *This is a fundamental point.*” Wrong. There is no abstract and transcendent ‘general will’<sup>15</sup> of equality reflecting the ‘will’ of slave-masters and slaves, landlords and peasants, capitalists and workers. What Rousseau was doing was to cast the particular class interests of the bourgeoisie, and the corresponding political-social structures that reflected and reinforced these interests, as the interests of society as a whole embodying precisely what so seduces Badiou: the “norm of general will [to] equality.” Rousseau’s real “acuity” was to give the gloss of formal equality to the very real cleavages in class society between oppressors and oppressed--cleavages that are rooted in exploitative capitalist production and social relations.

Rousseau’s origin story of the bourgeois political order holds that “whichever way we look at it, we always return to the same conclusion: namely that the social pact established equality among the citizens in that they all pledge themselves under the same conditions and must all enjoy the same rights.”

There is no “social contract” but rather a “social construct” that rationalizes bourgeois democracy and presents the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie as the consensual act of all. This, the fact that the social contract is what might be called a powerful “binding social fiction,” is “the most remarkable thing about the Social Contract”—and not, as Alain Badiou would have us believe, “that [it] establishes an intimate connection between politics and equality by an articulated recourse to an eventual foundation and a procedure of the indiscernible.”

“Rousseau’s acuity” was in asserting formal equality between exploiters and exploited (“its forms of manifestation [being] laws”), when in reality the class of exploiters exercises dictatorship over the class of exploited. The “general will” to equality as embodied in the Social Contract in reality is formal equality before the law in a bourgeois-democratic state.

However, equality before the law, in a society unequal and divided by social antagonisms, is decidedly not, as Badiou states in his reading of Rousseau, “a relation ... between the entire object from one point of view and the entire object from another point of view.” The social novelist Anatole France seems to know better than the political philosopher Alain Badiou: “The

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<sup>15</sup> As used by Rousseau, the general will denotes the will of society manifested in the Social Contract and its political institutions, but understood to be reflecting the “common good” and “welfare of the whole”, transcending individual preferences.

law, in its majestic equality, forbids the rich as well as the poor to sleep under bridges, to beg in the streets, and to steal bread.”<sup>16</sup>

We are entering the realm of “bourgeois right.” Bourgeois right refers, in the more restricted sense of the term, to economic and social relations, as concentrated in law and politics and ideology, that uphold formal equality but which actually contain and reinforce inequality. Notions of bourgeois right define an entire epoch of human history borne of and dominated by commodity production and exchange, as well as the social relations and ideas that stem from it. Some examples:

\*The standard of “equality before the law” of bourgeois jurisprudence is a standard that serves the equal treatment of the capitalist property holder in a society governed by capitalist market relations. For the dispossessed, formal equality masks the condition of fundamental powerlessness

\*The equal “right to own” is premised on the right to exploit and the separation of the mass of producers from the means of production. This equal right to own facilitates the capitalist process of competitive accumulation and leads not to a world of small, co-equal commodity owners but to the absorption of the less profitable by the more profitable, that is, to the increasing concentration and centralization of capital, and to the increasing misery and toil of world humanity.

\*The right of each and all to vote in a bourgeois democracy not only conceals and legitimizes control over state power by a bourgeois class—but is part of a matrix of ruling structures and mechanisms in the imperialist citadels that both rests on and serves to perpetuate the relations and privileges of empire and the division of the world into oppressor and oppressed nations.

#### AMELIORATING INEQUALITY, OR OVERCOMING IT

Rousseau’s view of inequality stands in dialectical relation to his view of equality. That is, the critique of inequality was confined within the bounds of bourgeois society:

As for equality, this word must not be taken to imply that degrees of power and wealth should be absolutely the same for all, but rather that power shall stop short of violence and never be exercised except by virtue of authority and law, and, where wealth is concerned, that no citizen shall be rich enough to buy another and none so poor as to be forced to sell himself; this in turn implies that the more exalted persons need moderation in goods and influence and the humbler persons moderation in avarice and covetousness.<sup>17</sup>

Hence, Rousseau was opposed to outright slavery but not to the end of exploitation, oppression, and all social inequalities.

Rousseau considers these social differences as being entirely acceptable insofar as the equality standard is maintained: these citizens are equal before the law. While Badiou might not align himself with Rousseau’s formulation of the mutual responsibilities of the “humble” and “exalted” in the republican community, objectively he cannot actually escape its material and ideological bounds. Because that would require uprooting the relations of exploitation on which these inequalities rest.

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<sup>16</sup> Anatole France, *The Red Lily*, 1894, chapter 7

<sup>17</sup> Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book 2, Chapter 11, p. 96; quoted in Bob Avakian, *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986) p 44

The kind of egalitarian politics advanced by Alain Badiou can resonate among sections of democratic intellectuals and radicalized youth. We are living in a period of extreme and unprecedented polarization in the world, of vast and howling differences in wealth, security, and human welfare. There is a thirst for justice towards others and reciprocity on an equal footing in the times in which we live. But these grotesque inequalities are a product and manifestation of the division of society into classes, and of the exploitative production relations on which they rest. They are an expression on a world scale of the fundamental contradiction of capitalist society, between socialized production and private appropriation by the capitalist class.

Polarization may be reduced with redistribution and reform, but the inequalities of the “late imperialist” economic and social order cannot be overcome without resolving this fundamental contradiction of capitalism, its exploitative core. They cannot be overcome without making revolution to transform the economic base and superstructure of society.

Alain Badiou is outraged by the state of the world but recoils from the scale and scope of the struggle and transformations required to bring a radically new world into being: proletarian revolution whose first great step is the seizure of state power. His claim that “the age of revolutions is over” and his rejection of the revolutionary seizure of power is reinforced by incorrect verdicts on the first wave of socialist revolution. He offers a political project of “pure equality” to be applied in a society divided into classes and in coexistence with bourgeois state power. He heralds this as a new politics of emancipation and declares that it embodies the interests of a “generic humanity” transcending class. But Badiou’s “generic” is in fact quite “particular.”

Alain Badiou is driven to a framework of understanding of the “problem” confronting humanity and its “solution” that corresponds to the class position and class outlook of a very definite segment of society, the radicalized petty bourgeoisie. He sees the problem of vast inequalities, but does not follow through to the taproots of exploitation in the economic base of society; he sees the solution as a “pure Idea of equality” in the political realm, not in overcoming the “4 Alls.”

In his work *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx offers a profound and trenchant commentary on the outlook and illusions of the democratic intellectual:

“...[O]ne must not form the narrow-minded notion that the petty bourgeoisie, on principle, wishes to enforce an egoistic class interest. Rather, it believes that the *special conditions* of its emancipation are the *general conditions* within the frame of which modern society can be saved and the class struggle avoided. Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. What makes them representatives of the petty bourgeoisie is the fact that in their minds they do not get beyond the limits which the latter do not get beyond in life, that they are consequently driven, theoretically, to the same problems and solutions to which material interest and social position drive the latter practically. This is, in general, the relationship between the *political* and *literary representatives* of a class and the class they represent.”

But the democrat, because he represents the petty bourgeoisie, that is, a transition class, in which the interests of the two classes are simultaneously mutually blunted, imagines himself elevated above class antagonism generally.”

Alain Badiou wants “equality” but shrinks from the complex process of making a revolution that not only overcomes social inequality but also achieves something far higher than equality.

## 2). ALAIN BADIOU’S (MIS)READING OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

Alain Badiou states “With the French Revolution, the communist hypothesis then inaugurates the epoch of political modernity.<sup>18</sup>” This formulation is so lacking in historical materialist understanding as to almost defy credulity.

It conflates the most radical of the bourgeois revolutions with communism. It conflates a revolution that enshrined bourgeois property relations and bourgeois right with one that aims to transcend these relations. It conflates two different worlds: a communist world that puts an end to capitalism and to an entire human epoch marked by class division; and the bourgeois world of exploitation, war, and misery—a world which with the further development of capitalism into imperialism, refining its bourgeois democratic structures, has become an even greater horror for humanity.

While Badiou’s assessment of the French Revolution is consistent with his maxim of egalitarianism as the essence of emancipation, it has nothing in common with real communism.

This calls to mind Marx’s famous description of the communist revolution as involving the “two most radical ruptures,” with “traditional property relations” and with “traditional ideas.” The production and social relations instantiated by the French Revolution represent the past, not the future. The ideals of the French Revolution represent the past, not the future. Yes, the French Revolution was thoroughgoing. Yes, it proclaimed “year one” as it radically swept away the feudal past—but this was about inscribing a new bourgeois property relation whose exploitative logic is...to make zeroes of the billions on this planet.

The bourgeois epoch announces itself as the removal of all artifice and barrier to individual freedom. The most important right in bourgeois society is a right to property—the right of capital to individual ownership and control over means of production workable and usable only by social labor; it is the right of access to labor power; it is the right to control this labor power once it is exchanged for wages. This kind of “freedom” did not exist in feudal society, where different property relations prevailed, where ownership had a hereditary stamp, where you did not have developed and integrated markets for “free labor,” or mobility to enter and exit different spheres of production and combine means of production with labor power. The French Revolution was giving this process full scope with a new institutional state framework.

Alain Badiou transmutes the French Revolution into the “inauguration of the communist hypothesis” and basks in the boldness of his reformulation of communism. Sadly, this does not even have the virtue of originality. There is an entire and pathetic revisionist communist tradition of turning communism into the fulfillment of the ideals of the bourgeois revolution; this is a “communism” that conciliates national chauvinism and imperial privilege. It is an ideological and political stance that massages away the need for revolution and puts the bourgeoisie on notice: there will be no revolution under our watch. And even within the international communist movement, there have been secondary tendencies to blur the distinction between communist and democratic principles.

Alain Badiou’s “communist hypothesis” is itself part of the skein of “traditional ideas” that the communist revolution radically ruptures with.

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<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, *New Left Review* 49, January-February 2008

The communist revolution aims towards the abolition of the “4 Alls.” The French Revolution, even in its most radical manifestations, decidedly was not about that; and objectively it could not put an end to all exploitation and oppression. As Engels had so insightfully stated:

“The great men, who in France prepared men’s minds for the coming revolution, were themselves extreme revolutionists. They recognized no external authority of any kind whatever. Religion, natural science, society, political institutions – everything was subjected to the most unsparing criticism: everything must justify its existence before the judgment-seat of reason or give up existence ... Every form of society and government then existing, every old traditional notion was flung into the lumber-room as irrational; the world had hitherto allowed itself to be led solely by prejudices; everything in the past deserved only pity and contempt. Now, for the first time appeared the light of day, the kingdom of reason; henceforth superstition, injustice, privilege, oppression were to be superseded by eternal truth, eternal Right, equality based on Nature and the rights of man.

“We know today that this kingdom of reason was nothing more than the idealized kingdom of the bourgeoisie; that this eternal Right found its realization in bourgeois justice; that this equality reduced itself to bourgeois equality before the law; that bourgeois property was proclaimed as one of the essential rights of man; and that the government of reason, the Contrat Social of Rousseau, came into being, and only could come into being, as a democratic bourgeois republic. The great thinkers of the eighteenth century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch<sup>19</sup>.”

This is the correct historical perspective and scientific understanding of the French Revolution. It was a bourgeois revolution. But these are the ideals that Mr. Badiou seeks to resurrect and rebrand as communism: “With the French Revolution, *the communist hypothesis* then inaugurates the epoch of political modernity.”

Alain Badiou argues: “[I]t is via Saint-Just and Robespierre that one enters the singular truth of the French Revolution, from where you can gain knowledge of it.<sup>20</sup>” Let’s examine the program of the Jacobins, Robespierre, and Saint-Just to get at the content of what Badiou considers to be the emergent “communist hypothesis.”

Georges Lefebvre, a historian of the French Revolution with socialist leanings, correctly comments that Robespierre and other radical figures of the revolution:

“regarded individual and hereditary property as an evil but declared it incurable ... were hostile to ‘opulence’ and the ‘rich’, that is, to wealth that was believed to be excessive and conducive to idleness. *Robespierre, like Saint-Just, whose Republican [Institutions] were particularly explicit, followed Rousseau in considering that liberty and equality (both civil and political) disappeared for most citizens as social inequality increased.* Thus, the Republic owed it to itself, on the one hand, to limit fortunes and to increase the number of small landowners; and on the other, to provide everyone with the means of rising in society ... *The ideal remained a social democracy of small independent producers, peasants and artisans*<sup>21</sup>”

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<sup>19</sup> Engels, “*Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*”, MESW 3, p 115-116; quoted in quoted in Bob Avakian, *Democracy, Can’t We Do Better Than That*, (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986) p 46

<sup>20</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, (London: Verso 2005) p 23

<sup>21</sup> Georges LeFebvre, *The French Revolution (from 1793 to 1799) Volume II*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1964), p 111

Lefebvre goes on to point out that this ideal cannot be realized. It is a point of analysis developed further and more scientifically by Bob Avakian:

At the heart of the matter was that Robespierre – and the Jacobins generally – tried to institute a society that would realize the bourgeois ideals of equality, freedom and the universal rights of man, avoiding the extremes of wealth and poverty, monopolized power and mass powerlessness. The historic irony lies not in the fact – as is often alleged by bourgeois democrats and bourgeois historians generally – that in the attempt to do this they resorted to dictatorial and violent means and then themselves became the victims of this; rather, it lies in the fact that *this bourgeois ideal actually corresponds most to the position of the petty bourgeoisie ...* - and yet this class (or more accurately, these petty bourgeois strata) are incapable of ruling society and reshaping it in their image. This is because the very property relations – and even more, the laws of commodity production and exchange – of which these strata are an expression, and the whole process of accumulation in which they are enmeshed once bourgeois production relations take hold, *inexorably lead to the polarization of society* into a small number of big bourgeois and a large mass of property-less proletarians – with these petty bourgeois strata caught in between. *One or the other of these two main forces must rule modern society*<sup>22</sup>. (all emphasis added)

With his “communist hypothesis,” Alain Badiou conflates the radical upsurges, social upheaval, and enthusiasm of the popular masses during the French Revolution with the communist revolution to overturn the bourgeois order and to create a new world. And herein lies the historical significance of the proletarian revolution. In previous epochs and in previous social revolutions, the oppressed have fought oppression. They have yearned for an end to their misery. But the revolutions in which the have-nots and oppressed were enlisted under banners and watchwords of something better and different, and which stirred their dreams, stood on a certain foundation of society in its motion and development. These revolutions were led by class forces representing new relations of production... which were new exploitative relations of production.

The proletarian revolution is different. It is not a revolution to replace one set of exploitative relations with another but to end all exploitation. The development of human society has brought it to a threshold: the material and social basis exists to overcome scarcity and exploitation. Only this revolution, led by the scientific understanding of communism, can give full play to the hatred for oppression and the creative energies and enthusiasm of the “wretched of the earth”—and mobilize the masses to bring a radically and different world into being.

### 3). ALAIN BADIOU SUBJECTIVIZES EQUALITY

Badiou wants to press Rousseau’s radical egalitarianism into modern service. He wants equality as paramount standard. But what does that mean in a society divided into classes? This constitutes the crux of the problem with formalistic notions of equality that take the egalitarian maxim as the essence of the politics of emancipation and that, not so surprisingly, seek inspiration in the egalitarian ideals of the bourgeois epoch—whether articulated by Kant, Jefferson, or Rousseau.

The solution to this problem in the Badiou-ist framework is this. He turns away from actual social transformation and turns equality into a regulative idea that serves as a principle of thought and action. But to what end is this action directed? Wherein lies its effectivity in a society founded on profound class divisions rooted in exploitative production relations?

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<sup>22</sup> Bob Avakian, *Democracy: Can’t We Do Better Than That?* (Chicago: Banner Press, 1986), p 35

In *Infinite Thought*, Alain Badiou specifies what he means and does not mean by equality:

“It is very important to note that ‘equality’ does not refer to anything objective. It is not a question of an equality of status, of income, of function, and even less of the supposedly egalitarian dynamics of contracts or reforms. Equality is subjective. It is equality with respect to public consciousness for Saint-Just, or with respect to political mass movement for Mao Tsetung. Such equality is in no way a social programme. Moreover, it has nothing to do with the social. It is a political maxim, a prescription<sup>23</sup>”

This seemingly radical stance, aglow in its absolutist insistence, is worth walking through on its own terms and in its best light. Equality, Badiou is telling us, is a matter of “subjective” engagement, of the capacity of the collective. The egalitarian maxim guides and inspires action. What Badiou in his broader writings evokes is that this act affirms the co-belonging of its collective protagonists and sparks visions of something higher; and, further, in extraordinary moments of political novelty and creativity, subjective equality produces new standards and frames of reference.

There may be something appealing in this. The problem, though, is that it does not correspond to the reality of the society, of bourgeois society—its class relations and its underlying relations of exploitation and what, therefore, needs to be radically transformed and ruptured with for emancipation. Badiou privileges the subjective *experience* of equality over a scientifically guided project of revolutionary transformation. His maxim has been acted on and the criteria for the politics of equality have been met...but society, in its exploitative and oppressive structures and relations, has not been altered.

Listen to what Badiou says: issues of “status” and “function” are immaterial to equality as political prescription. Clearly, mass movements and upsurges, and revolutionary eruptions, engender new bonds and shared purpose. But how is it possible to overcome the inequality of women in society without transforming relations of “status” and “function,” and doing so at the most profound level, which means taking in “all” of the “4 Alls?”

Badiou insists that equality is not “social programme.” To truly overcome inequality requires a “social programme” of radical transformation. It requires the overthrow of the bourgeois order, which Badiou has foresworn (“the age of revolutions is over”) and the establishment of a new mode of production, socialism, based on social ownership, social planning, and bringing economic activity under conscious social direction; it requires a qualitatively different kind of state, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the instrument to carry forward a thoroughgoing and deep-going revolution aimed at abolishing all exploitation and at uprooting all inequalities and oppressive relations and their reflections in the realm of ideas.

It is this revolution, a worldwide process of continuing revolution, that can uproot male supremacy, that can end the subjugation of minority nationalities, that can overcome the great divide between oppressor and oppressed nations in the world, and ultimately create a world community of humanity, no longer divided into antagonistic classes and separate national-states.

Against the measure of proletarian revolution, Rousseau is puny. Even punier are the attempts by those like Badiou to embrace the outlook of the past and bedeck it in the costume of communism.

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<sup>23</sup> Alain Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, (London: Continuum, 2005), p 54

Badiou's characterization of Mao's orientation towards mass movements in the passage cited from *Infinite Thought* cannot go uncommented on. Badiou has morphed Mao into a radical populist, a Mao that simply trusts in the wisdom of the masses. In fact, the masses, as Mao pointed out, divide into the advanced, intermediate, and backward—which is to say, there is no spontaneous “equality of understanding.” Moreover, Mao emphasized the need for leadership of mass movements, even those marked by intense solidarity, as was the case with the radical upsurges of the Cultural Revolution.

Yes, people have a capacity for truth (a criterion of equality for Badiou) but exactly in consequence of the divides and inequalities in society, this capacity does not translate into spontaneous gravitation towards or embrace of truth.

#### 4). HOW COMMUNISM GOES BEYOND EQUALITY AND WHY IT MUST

At best, Alain Badiou's approach to the politics of emancipation, one in which the “egalitarian maxim [is] proper to every politics of emancipation,” remains strictly within what Marx called the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right.” This yardstick of equality cannot constitute genuine emancipation—and left to itself and pursued as a goal unto itself will lead back to exploitation and inequality.

To illustrate the limitations of Badiou's approach to equality, and why this does not represent genuine emancipation, let's take the far reaches of the egalitarian standard in the sphere of distribution. Let's take this standard in a society without exploitation and where the governing principle is “from each according to their ability to each according to their work.” The amount of work performed is the (egalitarian) metric of payment or the amount of goods corresponding to payment according to work.

But different individuals have different capabilities and different needs, so this formal equal right masks real inequalities. In fact, this principle “from each according to their ability to each according to their work” governs socialist society. On the one hand, this represents a qualitative advance over capitalist society; this standard cannot be applied when capital extracts surplus labor from a proletariat separated from the means of production and thereby dependent on this exploitative wage relation to live. On the other hand, this standard remains a defect of socialist society and is part of the material and ideological soil engendering new bourgeois forces under socialism.

This problem and defect was first identified by Marx, and defined as part of the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right” that had to be transcended in order to overcome classes and social divisions and antagonisms — Marx from *Critique of The Gotha Programme*:

“Here... [in the principle ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his work’ followed in socialism]... the same principle prevails as that which regulates the exchange of commodities, as far as this is the exchange of equal values. “...(E)qual right here is still in principle bourgeois right. “This equal right is an unequal right for unequal labor. It recognizes no class differences because everyone is only a worker like everyone else; but it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges. It is, therefore a right of inequality, in its content, like every right... [U]nequal individuals (and they would not be different individuals if they were not unequal) are measurable only by an equal standard in so far as they are brought under an equal point of view, are taken from one definite side only... are regarded only as workers... To avoid all these defects, right instead of being equal would have to be unequal...”



“In ... communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor and therewith also the antithesis between mental and manual labor has vanished, after labor has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly — only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety.<sup>24</sup>”

In communist society, it becomes possible to implement a different principle of distribution: “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need.” The all-around abilities of individuals will be shaped and promoted by a society that values diversity but no longer attaches advantage to differences in individual capability nor suffocates human potential; a richness of need arising out of a society of mutual flourishing will be met as part of the very fabric of society itself. There is no “equality” or “inequality” bound up with this standard.

“From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” requires that social productive forces on a world scale have reached an advanced but sustainable level of development. “From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs” requires that a social consciousness and social morality is forged, and a scientific world outlook taken up, such that the individual in society deeply grasps his or her interconnectedness with society and is motivated by mutual concern based on the striving for common social good.

Communism requires getting beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right as Mao used the term in the broader sense to describe the social differences (like the division between mental and manual labor) and economic relations (including commodity production and the divisions and separations it engenders) that carry over from bourgeois society into socialist society—along with their reflections in the superstructure of society<sup>25</sup>.

If the restriction and overcoming of bourgeois right is not the perspective in the socialist transition to communism—if in place of that an egalitarian project and allied ideological discourse were to take hold--then the conditions in which some individuals obtain more than others, interacting with the corrosive ideological effects of “me-and-my-share”, would ultimately result in the reemergence of polarization, accumulation, private property, and antagonistic class division.

This understanding flows out of a scientific approach to achieving the “4 Alls” and the project of truly emancipating all of humanity.

With the achievement of the “4 Alls” and the abolition of classes, with the passage of society through revolution to a new era in which one section of society no longer dominates and represses another through the instrumentality of a state—with this, “equality” and “rights” and “duties” cease to have any meaning. The very “right to equality” exists, and can only exist, in relation to real inequalities and their material-social bases for reemergence. The existence of these rights requires a state to enforce them. Communism means and requires moving beyond equality and the rights associated with and attached to it. It means the withering away of a state to enforce these rights. Human social organization will have advanced to a higher level, in which humanity is consciously and voluntarily changing itself and the world.

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<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Robert Tucker, (W.W. Norton, 1978) p. 530 - 531

<sup>25</sup> Bob Avakian has deepened the scientific understanding of the whole question of bourgeois right, and getting beyond its narrow horizon, including in his recent talk, *Making Revolution and Emancipating Humanity*, available in *Revolution and Communism: A Foundation and Strategic Orientation*. (revcom.us)

Socialism is a transition from capitalism to communism. It will involve both fighting to eliminate social inequalities at every step of the way and enforcing rights of equality in socialist society—while, at the same time, carrying forward the transformations necessary to transcend equality. Socialist society must be striving to move beyond equality and other manifestations of bourgeois right; and must, in any given stage of development of the socialist revolution, be actively transforming relations and ideas in this direction to the maximum degree possible.

Alain Badiou's "egalitarian maxim proper to every politics of emancipation" does not offer a pathway of moving beyond the narrow horizon of bourgeois right—nor open the possibility of eliminating the bases for class society, commodity production, and exploitative and oppressive relations. It is stuck in bourgeois society. END.