

Just When You Thought It Was Safe To Participate Again - Communism, Its Recurring Nightmare.

Suhail Malik

In the rush of commentaries urgently written by public intellectuals of all political complexions on what has come to be known as the 'Arab Spring', Alain Badiou rehashed the standard account of what instigated the first, eventually successful, protests in Tunisia and how, as a popular movement, it acts as a beacon for political action not just in the Arab-speaking countries but also further afield:

A spark can set a field on fire. It all starts with the suicide through burning of a man who has been made redundant, whose miserable commerce that allows him to survive is threatened to be banned, and with a woman-officer slapping him to make him understand what is real in this world. This gesture expands within days, weeks, until millions of people cry their joy in a far-away square and the powerful rulers flee.¹

Badiou is emphatic that unlike those French or Western intellectuals who deign to tell the protestors what is 'democratic' in what they do he, Badiou, understands that those in the West can only learn from these movements, that 'democracy' is not necessarily their interest only the overthrow or counter-Statist mobilization, and that freedom and emancipation - 'an absolute change of existence, of unprecedented possibilities' - happens by such mass movements never through State operations. It is in fact a movement of communism.

Eager to get to this point of declared humility, to which we will return in a moment, Badiou does not name the man whose 'spark' set alight not just the 'field' of popular uprising but also himself (and it is not clear exactly how deliberately clumsy or jokey Badiou is in this all-too-fitting figure of speech, matching here the headline groaner from the The New York Times, 'How a Single Match Can Ignite a Revolution').² In fact, the 'spark' was lit by 26 year old Mohamed Bouazizi (or, more fully, Tarek al-Tayyib Muhammad Bouazizi, locally known as Basboosa) who died of burns on 4 January 2011. Bouazizi's self-immolation took place at the governor's office in his home town of Sidi Bouzid, Central Tunisia, some two and a half weeks earlier on 17 December 2010. There he poured petrol (or perhaps paint thinner) over himself

¹ Alain Badiou, "Tunisie, Egypte : quand un vent d'est balaie l'arrogance de l'Occident", in Le Monde, 18 February 2011 (www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2011/02/18/tunisie-egypte-quand-un-vent-d-est-balaie-l-arrogance-de-l-occident_1481712_3232.html); English translation by Cristiana Petru-Stefanescu (www.versobooks.com/blogs/394-alain-badiou-tunisie,-egypte-quand-un-vent-d-est-balaie-l-arrogance-de-l-occident).

² Robert Worth, 23 January 2011 (www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/weekinreview/23worth.html?src=twrhp).

and declared his intention to set himself alight unless the governor agreed to hear his protest against Faïda Hamdi, the police officer who, with her aides, had assaulted him less than two hours earlier (it is uncertain that he was in fact slapped by the officer herself, Hamdi being acquitted in April 2011 from her subsequent detention and trial for the alleged assault), confiscated his weighing scales and the cart from which he made his living selling fruit and vegetables on the street. Bouazizi had been working since he was about 10 years old following the death of his father early in his life and his step-father's poor health, earning about \$140 per month to support his family. Local knowledge has that Bouazizi continued to be harassed by the local cops because he was unable or unwilling to pay the bribes to allow him to continue vending, the harassment taking place under the pretext that he had no license to sell his wares even though such a permit is not required. Reports suggest that the 'spark' of Bouazizi's self-immolation was perhaps not wholly decisively made, his cigarette lighter jamming open during his protest against the functionaries' refusal to hear his demands for justice or, what is the same thing, only to go about his daily business without harassment. Aftermath: Bouazizi was taken to a number of increasingly well-equipped hospitals for treatment of his severe burns with gathering local then international press and public attention in his case. At his last place of treatment in the Burn and Trauma Centre at Ben Arous he was visited by Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the then President of Tunisia who, according to Bouazizi's family, promised to send him to France for further treatment, a transfer that never materialized. The funeral drew 5000 mourners, with chants against the authorities who had led Bouazizi to his protest. And, to return to Badiou's call to arms, the growth of protests in Tunisia following the funeral led to the Ben Ali's fleeing Tunisia on 14 January 2011, after 23 years in power and only ten days after Bouazizi's death. In these protests, riots and eventual overthrow – these cries of joy, according to Badiou - Bouazizi's name, the name of a street-seller in a minor provincial town in Tunisia, became at least equal to if not greater than the President's (meaning of course the State apparatus that consolidated him and itself around him). Bouazizi has since been commemorated by having the central avenue in Sidi Bouzid named after him; the Parisian City Council also voted unanimously to name a Place in the city after him. And Bouazizi has been recognized not only by the popular movements in Tunisia and statist sanctioning: there have been several further cases of men self-immolating in protest against harassment or quotidian persecution by officials, including: Lahseen Naji who electrocuted himself by grasping electrical transmission cables in Sidi Bouzid on 22 December 2010 after declaring 'No for misery. No for unemployment'; in Algeria, 37 year old father-of-two Mohsen Bouterfif died on 13 January 2011 after also being refused a group hearing with the mayor of Boukhadra over housing and employment concerns, the official challenging Bouterfif to prove his courage of complaint by emulating Bouazizi; Maamir Lotfi, also in Algeria, self-immolated on 17 January 2011 over similar refusal of an official audience, dying on 12 February; Abdelhafid Boudechicha, dying a day after his self-immolation on 28 January 2011, also over protests about housing and employment; Egyptian Abdou Abdel-

Moneim Jaafar died of his burns after setting fire to himself in front of his national Parliament; one unidentified death due to self-immolation in Saudi Arabia on 21 January 2011; and, in Sicily, the death of Noureddine Adnane, a Moroccan vendor of street goods, from burns on 11 February 2011, also self-inflicted in protest against continual harassment from local officials.³

As Badiou's teen-diary rhetoric might put it, self-immolation 'spread like wildfire' through the region. But his point is that it not just Bouazizi's name or actions on their own that are equal to the President as index of the established Tunisian State but rather how they are conveyed, amplified, course, through the mass popular movements that are for Badiou the manifestation of the communism he avows. This is a not just a question of the importance of whether names matter to designate political movements, and how they do so, or the question of which names will come to be important to mark a political trajectory – all significant questions in the configuration of communism to which we will later return. What is more pressing in the context of this collection of essays is the following question, which has to be asked with a cold-blooded lucidity: was Mohamed Bouazizi a participant in the protests against the Tunisian state?

- No, in that his actions were not part of a political or popular movement to get rid of a regime and there was nothing for him yet to 'participate' in. But then Bouazizi's despairing defiant act is only that of a private frustration in the face of what then seemed an immobile bureaucratic autocracy, a story of an individual's everyday misery without political ambition. To say as much is to repeat at another level the governor's refusal of Bouazizi's protest as having any significance beyond his own individual concerns. This we will not do, not least because it is already too late to neglect Bouazizi's protest in the configuration of the popular anti-Ben Ali movements in Tunisia and elsewhere.
- Yes, in that (i) his protest against the intimidation and bullying by local officials encapsulated the broader rage, frustration and defiance against authoritarian state power (however thinly disguised they may be as putative democracies), a refusal to return to common immiseration in the face of state power which, as Badiou puts it, 'expands' to the region's popular movements; and (ii) without some sense of Bouazizi

³ This paragraph drawn mostly from the Wikipedia page on Bouazizi (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohamed_Bouazizi), where full source references are given, as well as Eileen Byrne, 'Death of a street seller that set off an uprising', *Financial Times*, 16 January 2011 (www.ft.com/cms/s/0/6ed028a2-21a2-11e0-9e3b-00144feab49a.html), and Brian Whitaker, 'How a man setting fire to himself sparked an uprising in Tunisia', guardian.co.uk, 28 December 2010 (www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/dec/28/tunisia-ben-ali); Elizabeth Day, 'Fedia Hamdi's slap which sparked a revolution "didn't happen"', guardian.co.uk, 23 April 2011 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/apr/23/fedia-hamdi-slap-revolution-tunisia>).

as perhaps a pre-participant in the popular uprising against the Tunisian state, his actions are detached from the very protests in which his name and the memory of his protest circulates, turning his suicide into a noble sacrifice or, as it was declared in the Tunisian protests, 'martyrdom'. Bouazizi is then, to generalize, Participant 1 in the popular movements of the Arab Spring.

This is what Badiou effectively proposes by proposing Bouazizi's suicide to be the 'spark' of a political conflagration, speaking elsewhere of how what is important for a truth in the making by political militancy is participation in the mediation an Idea, the exception to ordinary life under the state that 'shows ... a possibility that everyone can share from now on',⁴ in this case the possibility endowed by the Idea of communism. But if Bouazizi is Participant 1 in the popular Tunisian uprising he is so because of the distressing act of his death and what led up to it, his fury and rage against low-level state harassment taken to an extreme, the annihilating refusal of all further relations to the state by his (in all senses) flagrant suicide. A nightmare of participation if ever there was one.

This nightmare-retraction is the other extreme of participation to the one identified by Eyal Weizman in a precursor to the current volume: collaboration with the state.⁵ If collaboration is participation to the point of assent or collusion with State power or the enemy, the extreme of participation heralded by Bouazizi as Participant 1 in the 'communism' of the Arab Spring could rather be called a negative participation or, to deploy another Badiouxian term, a participation by subtraction. Bouazizi is then better identified as Participant -1 in the Arab Spring, a formulation that signals how he was a pre-participant in the popular movements in which his name has become less central as they themselves became more common, transferring to Egypt (where the arbitrary detention and killing of Khaled Mohammed Said by police in Alexandria on 6 June 2010 is no less important as a key referent for the uprisings in February 2011), Bahrain, Yemen, Syria, Libya.... For all its mock-algebraic formality, speaking of Bouazizi as Participant -1 captures equally well the way in which he posthumously 'took part' in a series of political mobilizations to which he was a retroactively comprehended precursor.

Two remarks on such a formulation:

a) The negative sign in the formula of a Participant -1 is clearly not to be taken as indicating that Bouazizi's participation is contrary to the popular movements against oligarchic-autocratic states in the Arab-Gulf region; it indicates only the ontology of the participation, an extrication, not its tendency or orientation. The 'participant' negative to the

⁴ Badiou, The Communist Hypothesis, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran, Verso, 2010 [French publication: 2009], pp253-54.

⁵ The Nightmare of Participation, ed. Markus Miessen, Sternberg Press, 2010, p9.

tendency of these movements, which is what President Ben Ali was in Tunisia, is better designated by ‘- Participant X’, where X designates the ‘anyone’ participating in the popular movements. Such a formula for the counter-participant is only a metonym for an entire systemic and structural condition of the power to be deposed by these insurrections and which is no less their ‘cause’.⁶

b) The retroactive determination of Participant -1 as the instigation (not cause) of the movements and occasions that call upon it and give it a force, sense, meaning beyond itself is what marks her or him as Participant 1. Their act does not belong to the development of actions subsequent to it since these have not yet taken place and it can have no cogency in their terms when it takes place; yet the act is integral to what follows from it as instigation for further protest, the initial term of a series, etc. This prevarication or double determination proposes an oscillation as to whether the pre-participant is a participant or not, is inside or outside of the subsequent ‘fully’ political action in which she or he is claimed as precursor.⁷ This chrono-logical prevarication of political identification can however be suspended by designating Participant ±1 to be a unitary origin: Participant 0, in the way of other origins or beginnings such as Year Zero, Patient Zero, Ground Zero, etc. But this is not a simple or single origin, rather the covering over of a smeared prevarication that is the integration of Participant -1 into a political configuration that subsequently positivizes her or his manifestation, however flagrant, grand or minor, socially or privately motivated (or, more likely, in some mixing of the two).

If there can be any such thing as a negative participation, if it is not an immediate contradiction in terms (which logical contradiction would under identitarian thinking require its (non-)manifestation as an ontological annihilation or preclusion), it must itself be contrary to any sense of an inherently ‘positive’ participation. The latter is the building of an agreeable consensus on the basis of ideological, hegemonic or institutional norms (not least the norm that is better to agree) that is the by now familiar object of critique in Markus Miessen’s books of which the current volume is the latest installment. (If the titles in this series resemble

⁶ The structural-historical conditions for the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt are effectively summarized in articles by, respectively, Chamseddine Mnasri and Philip Marfleet in International Socialism, 130, April 2011 (www.isj.org.uk/index.php4?s=contents&issue=130).

⁷ The logic of a retroactively identified precursor that could not be identified as such at the time of its occurrence bears comparison with that of Jean Laplanche’s theory of a complex ‘originary seduction’ establishing the unconscious in its primary repression (New Foundations for Psychoanalysis, trans. David Macey, Blackwell, 1989 [1987]). The analogy is made not in order to identify the political dimension discussed in the main text here with the intra-psychic processes Laplanche theorizes, locating the truth of one in/or the other (for neither needs the other), but only to remark that their maybe common logic interferes in both instances with the very possibility of establishing either a known universal determinant for their subsequent (human) developments, or unique and identifiable ‘events’ for their respective inceptions.

Romero's zombie-movie series, then it is clear that the zombies that need to be put to death here, if they will not first kill us with their encroaching corrosion of indifference, are the malpractices of politics under the heading of consensus and its demand for indifferent assent). Moreover, negative participation no less repudiates the formulation of politics as a common space of agonism or even antagonism that has been the central contention in Miessen's series, since the retraction from all relations to the State that it enacts is no less the refutation of any common basis for the political struggle organized according to smaller or larger counter-identifications to collective norms (which are only sometimes given State formulations). Negative participation is rather the implosion of the acceptance of the conditions by which a struggle or a claim could be negotiated. It is the destruction of a given common space (its negativity). Yet through its retroactive significance it is an (eventually) public destruction (its participating nonetheless). This paradoxical notion of a public destruction of common assent could be readily captured by the kinds of formulations put forward by, say, Giorgio Agamben's 'community with nothing in common', or Jean-Luc Nancy's 'being-with' of an 'inoperative' or 'shattered' community, Jacques Rancière's 'redistribution of the sensible', and others no less clichéd in contemporary art for legitimizing through philosophical approbation art's prevalent shadow politics. Such formulations characteristically maintain the prevarication of Participant ± 1 without termination, as a perpetually stalled Participant 0 whose politics are forever in emergence, aporia or other indefiniteness, socially-oriented yet dis-identificatory, always in an originary complexity yet without substantially determined consequence, etc. 'Participant 0' concisely captures a range of such positions: non-participation, participating in nothing, neutral (i.e., non-committed) participation, participation without participation, passive participation, originary participation, non-identified or indeterminate participation, and so on. To be clear: Participant -1 negates such (pre-subjective) modalities of participation.

What then does Participant -1 participate in? With Badiou, it was for Bouazizi the eternal or universal of communism manifested through the North African and Gulf uprisings:

this triumph of the popular action, illegal by nature, will be forever victorious. That a revolt against state power can be absolutely victorious is a lesson universally available. This victory always indicates the horizon where all collective action, subtracted from the authority of the law, stands out. [...] The popular uprising we are talking about is manifestly without a party, without any hegemonic organisation, without a recognised leader. It should always be determined whether this characteristic is a strength or a weakness. It is in any case what makes it have, in a pure form, without a doubt the purest since the Commune of Paris, all the necessary

traits for us to talk about a communism as movement. “Communism” here means:
common creation of a collective destiny.⁸

The mass movements overthrowing the Tunisian state and then (seeking to do so) elsewhere in any case identify Bouazizi’s own protest to take place within the horizon of a communist movement. And this movement is to be understood as distinct from the left that colludes with or organizes itself in terms of State formations.⁹ It is a communist movement because it is a common one - not the given common largely (over-)determined by the State but a common made by a people between themselves. More exactly, this commonality and this ‘people’ is (i) generic, ‘representing in one place humanity in its entirety’, such that all sides and voices can be heard (the dream of full unbridled participation by all and for all), and (ii) it ‘overcomes the great contradictions’ of social differentiation – Badiou’s examples here are that of intellectuals and manual workers, between men and women, between rich and poor, between Muslims and Copts, between people living in the province and those living in the capital – that is otherwise the state’s claim to mediate and police. That is, a popular movement is communist if it is common and universal not just in its claim (it is generic) but also in its actuality.¹⁰ In this and with almost the same words, Badiou seconds man of the left Bertrand Delanoë, Socialist Party Mayor of Paris, who told the press a week before the publication of Badiou’s article on the Arab region uprisings that the city council’s unanimous vote to name a site after Mohamed Bouazizi ‘was the expression of admiration, affection and support to the Tunisian people whose accomplishment was something extraordinary, not only for Tunisia itself and the Arab world, but also for the entire world’.¹¹

Two comments: first and trivially, with regard to Badiou: though he chastises a Western ‘colonial arrogance’ for telling these movements how democratic they are, what he insists that everyone should pay heed to – including himself as much as the uprisings themselves - is that they are but the triumph of a communism that he knows about anyway having already theorized it qua Idea and its manifestations as political truths. According to Badiou, what we learn from these movements is really only that Badiou is right. Whatever else it may be, Badiou’s praise of the popular insurrections is in other words no less an opportunistic confirmation of his own theorization, and his condemnation of its ‘democratic’

⁸ ‘Tunisie, Egypte’.

⁹ Communist Hypothesis, 198-99.

¹⁰ By the time of the writings on communism in the 2000s, Badiou prefers the term ‘eternal’ to ‘universal’ as a way to mark that whatever historical specificity communism has – the Paris Commune of 1871, Russian Bolshevism from 1902-1917, Paris in May ’68, the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1965-68 – its truth is not historical but that of the Idea, a ‘transtemporal availability’ of these historical moments to one another (Communist Hypothesis, 232-33).

¹¹ Bourzou Daragi, ‘TUNISIA: Paris to have either a Rue or Place Mohammad Bouazizi’, Ethiopian Review, 9 February 2011 (www.ethiopianreview.com/news/201002/?p=20451).

overdetermination is primarily a point of rivalry between French intellectuals. Secondly and more substantially, with regard to what participation in those movements has to be: the horizon for participation is communism as the generic, universal commonality of all people. This true participation is alone politics with Badiou. It is not the formation of a consensus but the 'militant' practice of the truth of the Idea. And because it is generic and universal, communism's 'emancipatory politics is essentially the politics of the anonymous masses..., of those who are held in a state of colossal insignificance by the State'.¹² Such is the riposte to the immediately preceding point: since Badiou's own communist prescription is that of the masses themselves, there is no 'colonial arrogance' on his part. More importantly, it is also why his elision of Bouazizi's name is entirely appropriate: the Tunisian's self-immolation was indeed an act of participation in the communist overthrow of that State and in its communist truth it is right that Bouazizi's name is forgotten, his act anonymized, that he disappears into the mass that brings the emancipation from the State he too may have wanted. Bouazizi was then only ever a Participant X in the uprisings, the X marking his necessary anonymity in the horizon of communism. This anonymity is the political truth of his act. It is otherwise just the unhappy story of a frustrated individual with only private consequence. Bouazizi's deadly protest is here not so much positivized (-1 to +1) as incorporated as a pure participation (± 1 to X) into the body of truth that is/are these communist movement(s), purified of its horrific and thankfully uncommon particularity.

Not that communism is without any names at all. Along with the anonymous masses that are the proper expression of its generic universality, in which Bouazizi takes his place, communism is also 'distinguished all along the way by proper names which define it historically', a 'glorious Pantheon of revolutionary heroes' (the usual suspects, from Spartacus to Che Guvera).¹³ These names symbolize the 'rare and precious network of ephemeral sequences of politics'. With such names 'the ordinary individual discovers glorious, distinctive individuals as the mediation of his or her own individuality', a gathering point of identification for the 'anonymous actions of millions of militants, rebels, fighters' through which they come to count as one. Though they are themselves anonymous the communist masses then do each have their own names: those of 'an individual, a pure singularity of body and thought' by which they act in each case as one. These names are those of the true Participants 1, the ones who identify the mass movements to be the each time particular, local, historical variant of eternal communism, that give the anonymous masses an identity and a political integrity; through which generic and universal participants overcome their anonymity (to themselves), 'discovering' their own (transversal) individuality.

¹² Communist Hypothesis, 249-50.

¹³ Communist Hypothesis, 250.

Looking again past Badiou's manifest aspiration to be such a Participant 1, for which career fulfillment the Arab uprisings provide a great opportunity (such is the bid of the article in Le Monde), what is important is that these individuals give name to communism's otherwise anonymous participation because what they think and enact – project - is not just the destruction or retraction from the State but also what Badiou calls the 'real of a politics' as 'another State' than the current one, this other State being one that is 'subtracted from the power of the State' and thus leads to the withering away of the State.¹⁴ Mao is Badiou's hero in this regard: Chinese State power was seized and sustained so that State organization could be undone 'in the name of' and through the anonymous masses who 'discovered' themselves individually and no less in their collective name and unity with Mao and his thinking. In general terms, communism's Participant 1 is the one who rivals State power by formulating and instituting this other State that dissolves the State. For all the opprobrium heaped on State power, communism's Participant 1 is but a rival to the State.

In his horrific withdrawal from all relations to the State Bouazizi had no such ambitions. Together with the absence of any 'thinking' – meaning a theorizing of the destruction of the State – on Bouazizi's part this is why, with Badiou, the Tunisian's name cannot – should not - be in the 'glorious Pantheon' of communism but must rather be subordinated to the generic universality of the masses that are its body of truth. With Badiou, Bouazizi as named individual means nothing but the 'spark' that will result in the unification of a communism (to be) named by their Participant 1.

Participant -1 is however here the demise and retraction from all relations to Statism. Those relations are in a manner restored to or overloaded on Participant -1 by Participant X's retroactive determination (as a precursory Participant 1, distinct now to the Participant 1 who is the ideological singularity of the movement). As such, Participant -1 is the terminus of communism without the (inter-)mediation of the auto-immune State of communism or its identifying individual. Communism is then peremptorily realized by a man's self-immolation in a provincial Tunisian government office (signaling that if it is to be a communism the Arab Spring is an eschatology). If these uprisings are to be identified as communist or if communism is indeed the horizon of its 'participation', then Participant -1 ought to have a more 'glorious' name than any in its Pantheon of Participants 1. But, as noted, this name cannot be so registered: communism is the political truth of the anonymous mass identified and acting as one through the name of a singularity of body and thought which Bouazizi is not.

Yet Bouazizi's horrific act gives his name an importance in the uprisings and in this non-anonymity he has too much name to take his dutiful place in the generic masses (Participant

¹⁴ Communist Hypothesis, 248.

X) and yet is also not the Participant 1 that is the singularity of body and thought of a great name of communism. An option presents itself at this point: either the theory is followed, in which case the uprisings are determined to be communist movement and Bouazizi does not belong to it; organized in terms of a Participant X identified only via a Participant 1, his horrific death has no dimension of participation in those movements that claimed him as one of their own. Or Bouazizi is salient to the Tunisian and subsequent uprisings, in which case the persistence of his name and memory marks them to be distinct to communism as the politics of a generic universality.

That we know Bouazizi by name, that he can be identified as a Participant -1 in the uprisings, is enough to refute the theoretical idealism, to prove that the Arab uprisings are not communist (at least, not the communism of a generic universality as Badiou proposes it). Put otherwise: as Participant -1 Bouazizi is not of the anonymous mass nor the Pantheon of communist greats and as such disproves that these are movements of a generic universality acting as one. They are, as of April 2011, still anti-autocratic, non-Statist, popular, public movements in relation to the State. Not only is their politics otherwise yet to be determined, so are the number of names that will constitute them.

In more general terms, Participant -1 refutes the communism of generic universality as the horizon of participation. It also demonstrates that total non-participation in the State, equivalent to a peremptory total participation in communism now, can only be its self-destructive ontological annihilation. Waking up from the 'nightmare of participation' and the recursive, worse dream of non-participation requires the rejection of communism, generic universality and its subordination to the one name of Participant 1. This is not to avow or affirm democracy either but only to dispense with universality, communism and anti-Statism as conditions for what participation amounts to: political reality. It is rather the public determination of Participant -1 that generates a participation without completion for the latter's negative participation or retraction from it. 'Without completion' since Participant -1 cannot be known as such to her or himself but only retroactively proposed or taken to be such by Participants X, a result rather an origin of the movements that cannot be guaranteed in advance by either side. Who participates is either an X or the one who will be -1 but never was Participant 1. Conversely, there can only be a Participant 1 of these movements through the lie of the ex-termination of/into their anonymity, to which communism has of course lent many names for and against. And if it is Participant -1 whose name is claimed – seized - by the popular movement of Participants X, with which masses act against the State then they do so not by participating in one name but multifariously, publicly, and with a surfeit of names of which Mohamed Bouazizi's will be but one.