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## **Critical Perspectives on Slavoj Žižek's Perception of "Commons"<sup>1</sup>**

**Post – Fordist Economy and Lukács'**

**Ontological Foundation of Social Classes**

### **Introduction**

The long night of the left is drawing to a close. The defeat, denunciations and despairs of the 1980s and 1990s, the triumphalist "end of history", the unipolar world of American hegemony – all are fast becoming old news. In Europe, in the year 2000, Jürgen Habermas and Ulrich Beck enthused about the European Union and its common currency, prophesying that it would become the model for the future of humanity. How different the reality is today!<sup>2</sup>

These are the first lines of the Introduction of a volume, edited by S. Žižek and C. Douzinas that brings together the discussions during the conference "The Idea of Communism" organized by Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities in March 2009. The key question was whether "communism" is still the name to be used to designate radical emancipatory projects and how to reconfigure such a concept within a world marked by havoc and crisis. In his book *First as Tragedy, then as Farce* Žižek has given a specific definition of the 2008 financial meltdown, treating it as the second death of Fukuyama's utopia of the happy 90's and the "end of history". The collapse of the liberal - democratic political utopia on 9/11/2001 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism. What happened in 2008 is then a sign of the end of the economic face of Fukuyama's dream. Žižek himself believes that we live in apocalyptic times.

Apocalypse is characterized by a specific mode of time, clearly opposed to the two other predominant modes: traditional circular time (time ordered and regulated on cosmic principles, reflecting the order of nature and the heavens; the time-form in which microcosm and macrocosm resonate in harmony), and the modern linear time

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<sup>1</sup> Paper prepared for CUA 's (Commission on Urban Anthropology) Annual Conference, "Market Vs Society? Human principles and economic rationale in changing times", Corinth 27 – 29 May 2011

<sup>2</sup> C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, Introduction

of gradual progress or development. Apocalyptic time is the “time of the end of time,” the time of emergency, of the “state of exception” when the end is nigh and we can only prepare for it<sup>3</sup>.

In this paper we will examine aspects of his Communist Hypothesis in these apocalyptic times. We will specifically examine his interpretation of what Hardt and Negri call “the commons” and raise the question of social classes. The changes in the nature of labor will be considered in terms of their impact on the connection between economy, society and production relations and their meaning for radical politics. After this critical engagement with Žižek’s work with reference to various contemporary radical thinkers, the paper proposes that a return to the later work of Georg Lukács and his ontological perception of labor as the fundamental category of social being would be very useful in order to grasp the real content of the changes. Such an approach can provide answers and give a sense of the boundaries to Žižek’s analysis.

Žižek’s writing has developed the last decade a much harder edged political definition. Alex Callinicos, who is a critic of Žižek’s work, recognizes that the latter “has emerged as the premier contemporary practitioner of Ideologiekritik, a champion in what Althusser used to call the class struggle in theory”<sup>4</sup>. Our question is then about Žižek’s contribution towards a theory of class struggle along with his perception of “commons”. Žižek has repeatedly since 2001 emphasized that the urgent task of the economic analysis today is, again, to repeat Marx’s critique of political economy, without succeeding on to the temptation of the ideologies of “postindustrial” societies<sup>5</sup>. Most recently he has named this return to the “critique of political economy” as “the sine qua non of contemporary communist politics”<sup>6</sup>. What are then the results of his own return during the last decade?

Žižek’s ideas are rooted in readings of Hegel, Marx and the French psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan. Žižek is usually ambivalent and “one can never be sure he’s not joking”<sup>7</sup>. Reading his work is anything but an easy task ...

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<sup>3</sup> S. Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then As Farce*, Verso, 2009, p.93, 94

<sup>4</sup> A. Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique*, Polity Press, 2006, p. 112

<sup>5</sup> S. Žižek, *Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri rewritten the communist manifesto for the twenty first century?*, Rethinking Marxism, Volume 13, Number 3/4 2001 in <http://www.egs.edu/faculty/slavoj-zizek/articles/have-michael-hardt-and-antonio-negri-rewritten-the-communist-manifesto-for-the-twenty-first-century/>

<sup>6</sup> [maydaybookstore.blogspot.com/2010\\_07\\_01\\_archive.html](http://maydaybookstore.blogspot.com/2010_07_01_archive.html)

<sup>7</sup> A. Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique*, Polity Press, 2006, p. 112

## The Concept of the “Commons” in Žižek’s Recent Work. Today’s Global Capitalism Global Antagonisms and the Predominance of “Intellectual – Immaterial Labour”.

It is not enough to remain faithful to the communist idea – one has to locate it in real historical antagonisms which give this Idea a practical urgency. The only *true* question today is: do we endorse the predominant naturalization of capitalism, or does today’s global capitalism contain antagonisms powerful enough to prevent its definite reproduction? There are four such antagonisms: the looming threat of ecological catastrophe, the inappropriateness of the notion of private poverty for so – called “intellectual property”, the socio – ethical implications of new techno – scientific developments (especially in biogenetics), and, last but not least, new forms of apartheid, new Walls and slums. There is a qualitative difference between the last feature – the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included – and the other three, which designate the domains of what Hardt and Negri call the “commons”, the shared substance of our social being, the privatization of which involves violent acts which should also, where necessary, be resisted with violent means<sup>8</sup>.

First of all, Žižek has repeatedly stated, like Marx, that the prospect of the proletarian revolution emerges out of the inherent antagonisms of the capitalist mode of production. In his very interesting review of *Empire*<sup>9</sup> a decade ago with the title “*Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri rewritten the communist manifesto for the twenty first century?*” he criticizes Hardt and Negri in terms of their failure to repeat, in today's conditions, Marx's line of argumentation about antagonisms. In this respect, he thought that *Empire* remains a pre-Marxist book<sup>10</sup>. He was also critical of the three practical proposals with which *Empire* ends, i.e. political struggle on three global rights: the rights to global citizenship, a minimal income, and the reappropriation of the new means of production (i.e. access to and control over education, information and communication). He notes that “it is a paradox that Hardt and Negri, the poets of mobility, variety, hybridization, and so on, call for three demands formulated in the

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<sup>8</sup> S. Žižek, How to begin from the beginning in C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 212

<sup>9</sup> M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Empire*, Harvard University Press, 2001

<sup>10</sup> S. Žižek, *Have Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri rewritten the communist manifesto for the twenty first century?*, Rethinking Marxism, Volume 13, Number 3/4 2001

terminology of universal human rights. The problem with these demands is that they fluctuate between formal emptiness and impossible radicalization”<sup>11</sup>.

Žižek’s reading of *Empire* is off – course again ambivalent, since his criticism suddenly gives its place to a positive appraisal, which is quoted in the paperback of *Empire*:

After reading *Empire*, one cannot escape the impression that if this book were not written, it would have to be invented. What Hardt and Negri offer is nothing less than a rewriting of *The Communist Manifesto* for our time: *Empire* conclusively demonstrates how global capitalism generates antagonisms that will finally explode its form. This book rings the death-bell not only for the complacent liberal advocates of the 'end of history,' but also for pseudo-radical Cultural Studies which avoid the full confrontation with today's capitalism.

After *Empire* Hardt and Negri had published *Multitude*<sup>12</sup> and concluded the trilogy with *Commonwealth*<sup>13</sup>. In the last book they develop even more their concept of immaterial and biopolitical production, based on their reading of Marx and especially one of Marx’s key economic texts, the *Grundrisse*. According to Hardt:

Today, it is clear that industry no longer holds the hegemonic position within the economy ... The claim is not primarily quantitative but qualitative. Industry no longer imposes its qualities over other sectors of the economy and over social relations more generally. That seems to me a relatively uncontroversial claim. More disagreement arises when one proposes another form of production as successor to industry and hegemonic in this way. Toni Negri and I argue that immaterial or biopolitical production is emerging in that hegemonic position. By immaterial and biopolitical we try to grasp together the production of ideas, information, images, knowledges, code, languages, social relationships, affects and the like<sup>14</sup>.

This hypothesis of such a tendency is very influential to Žižek. Despite his criticism to the notion of *Multitude* Žižek has raised in 2005 some important questions about

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

<sup>12</sup> M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Penguin Press HC, 2004

<sup>13</sup> M. Hardt, A. Negri, *Commonwealth*, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009

<sup>14</sup> M. Hardt, The common in communism in C. Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 134, 135

immaterial labour after reading *Empire* and *Multitude*, with which he deals in all his recent work:

Can one really interpret this move towards the hegemonic role of immaterial labor as the move from production to communication, to social interaction (in Aristotelian terms, from *techne* as *poiesis* to *praxis*: as the overcoming of the Arendtian distinction between production and *vis activa*, or of the Habermasian distinction between instrumental and communicational reason)? How does this "politicization" of production, where production directly produces (new) social relations, affect the very notion of politics? Is such an "administration of people" (subordinated to the logic of profit) still politics, or is it the most radical sort of depoliticization, the entry into "post-politics?" And, last but not least, isn't democracy by necessity, with regard to its very notion, non-absolute<sup>15</sup>?

The crucial concept in his various answers to all these questions is the one of "commons". This concept is developed extensively in Hardt's and Negri's last work *Commonwealth*. According to Negri *Multitude* presented some problems and in particular, the question of how the multitude could organize itself. He adds that the first issue they confront in *Commonwealth* is the becoming Prince, in Machiavellian terms, of the multitude. The authors thought that the possibility of giving a structure, or a spine, a backbone to the multitude resided in the concept of the common. This two notions (multitude and the common) are interchangeable and tend to be juxtaposed and confounded. That is to say, the common does not precede or follow the multitude: the making of the multitude *is* the common. They build the concept of the common inside the relation of capital. But today the common is the name of capitalism: Negri concludes that capitalism today is capitalism of the common<sup>16</sup>.

If "commons" and multitude are interchangeable notions, how does Žižek then interpret the former when he is so critical of the latter? Before we answer this question, let's start from the definition of "the common", which is quoted by Hardt in his *Common in Communism*. Hardt distinguishes between two types of the common, both of which are the object of neo – liberal strategies of capital:

On the one hand, the common names the earth and all the resources associated with it: the land, the forests, the water, the air, minerals and so forth. This is closely related to seventeenth-century English usage of "the commons" (with an 's'). On the other hand, the common also refers to the results of human labour and creativity,

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

<sup>16</sup> A. Negri, *On commonwealth* in [http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp\\_negri22.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/p/fp_negri22.htm)

such as ideas, language, affects and so forth. You might think of the former as the “natural” common and the latter as the “artificial” common, but really such divisions between natural and artificial quickly break down. In any case, neo – liberalism, has aimed to privatize both these forms of common<sup>17</sup>.

Ideas, images, knowledge, code, languages and even affects tend to escape the boundaries of property and become common. There is, according to Hardt, located an emerging contradiction internal to capital: the more the common is corralled as property, the more its productivity is reduced; and yet expansion of the common undermines the relation of property in a fundamental and general way<sup>18</sup>.

Now, it’s time to return to Žižek’s statement about today’s global capitalism antagonisms and his perception of immaterial labour and common in our present apocalyptic time. To be certain, he points that what the domains of the commons share is an awareness of the potential for destruction, up to and including the self – annihilation of humanity itself, if the capitalist logic of enclosing them is allowed a free run<sup>19</sup>. These domains of the commons are linked, as we have mentioned with the three antagonisms (the fourth will be examined separately in the next chapter):

The commons of culture, the immediately socialized forms of “cognitive” capital, primarily language, our means of communication and education, but also the shared infrastructure of public transport, electricity, post etc ... The commons of external nature, threatened by pollution and exploitation (from oil to rain forests and the natural habitat itself). The commons of internal nature (the biogenetic inheritance of humanity)<sup>20</sup>.

Žižek’s critique to Hardt and Negri lies here in a slightly different level which is at its core the same with his previous critique. Negri’s precise formulation, is not abolish capital, but compel it to recognize the common good, i.e., one remains within capitalism. “If ever there was a utopian idea, this is it”, Žižek notes<sup>21</sup>. That’s why, when “immaterial work” is celebrated as the kind of work which directly produces

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<sup>17</sup> M. Hardt, The common in communism in C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 136

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

<sup>19</sup> S. Žižek, How to begin from the beginning in C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 213

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 222

social relations, Žižek warns that one should not forget what this means within a commodity economy: that new domains, hitherto excluded from the market, are now commodified.

When in trouble, we no longer talk to a friend but pay a psychiatrist or counselor to take care of the problem: not parents but paid babysitters or educators take care of children, etc. We are thus in the midst of a new process of the privatization of the social, of establishing new enclosures<sup>22</sup>.

Despite his critique, what he shares with Hardt and Negri is not only the concept of common, but also the turn to the Italian economist Carlo Vercellone, in order to develop such a notion. Carlo Vercellone argues that just as in an earlier period there was a tendential movement from rent to profit as the dominant mode of capitalist expropriation, today there is a reverse movement from profit to rent<sup>23</sup>. According to Hardt, this is not a return to the past, since the income generated from a patent, for instance, is very different from that generated from land ownership. Patents and copyrights generate rent in the sense that they guarantee an income based on the ownership of material or immaterial property. Hardt considers this analysis crucial, since it proves that capital remains generally external to the processes of the production of the common<sup>24</sup>.

In the same manner, Žižek refers to post – fordism which is characterized by the “becoming – rent of profit”. For Žižek, this analysis is also very important, because it reveals why direct authority is needed and why the link between democracy and capitalism has been broken. It is broken, since the privatization of the “general intellect” and the extraction of rent needs a non – economic force in order to impose (arbitrary) legal condition, which are no longer “spontaneously” generated by the market<sup>25</sup>. Immaterial – intellectual labor is then, in Žižek’s perspective, linked with the very logic of today’s capitalism.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 224

<sup>23</sup> See C. Vercellone, *The new articulation of wages, rent and profit in cognitive capitalism* in [http://www.generation-online.org/c/fc\\_rent2.htm](http://www.generation-online.org/c/fc_rent2.htm)

<sup>24</sup> M. Hardt, The common in communism in C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 137

<sup>25</sup> S. Žižek, How to begin from the beginning in C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 224

That is the central problem we are facing today: how does the late – capitalist predominance (or even hegemonic role) of “intellectual labour” affect Marx’s basic scheme of the separation of labour from its objective conditions, and of the revolution as the subjective re – appropriation of those objective conditions? Spheres such as the internet, production, exchange and consumption are inextricably intertwined, potentially even identified: my product is immediately communicated to and consumed by another. Marx’ classic notion of commodity fetishism in which “relations between people” are “not so much hidden beneath the veneer of objectivity, but are themselves the very material of our everyday exploitation, so we can no longer talk about “reification” in the Lukácsian sense. Far from being invisible, social relationality in its very fluidity is directly the object of marketing and exchange: in “cultural capitalism”, one no longer sells (and buys) objects which “bring” cultural or emotional experiences, one directly sells (and buys) such experiences<sup>26</sup>.

Is Georg Lukács’ thought out of date, unable to grasp today’s capitalist dynamics? Žižek seems to give his answer, when he considers exploitation in the classic Marxist sense no longer possible. What seems to happen is the gradual relative transformation of the profit generated by the exploitation of the labour force into rent appropriated by the privatization of the “general intellect”. Alienation is then perceived as the cut off from the social field of intellectual work, even if one owns his PC and is not separated from the objective conditions of his work, since “general intellect” is mediated by private capital. Žižek gives the example of Bill Gates. He is the richest man in the world not due to the good software products he produced or the exploitation of his hired intellectual workers, but due to the fact that he privatized and controlled Microsoft, a particular form of the “general intellect” and appropriated the rent received from allowing millions of intellectual workers to participate<sup>27</sup>.

A consistent and comprehensive critique of the concept of “commons” in contemporary radical theory cannot be developed in this paper and we will proceed limiting our examination to a critique of Žižek’s perception and to the proposal for a return to Lukács against Žižek’s treatment of his thought as outdated.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p. 221

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p. 225



## From Harvey's Critique and Žižek's Left Decisionism to Lukács Ontological Foundation of Social Classes

David Harvey has written a very interesting critique of *Commonwealth* and his notes are far too relevant with Žižek's boundaries in his own perception of commons. According to Harvey, *Commonwealth's* many abstractions sound fine, but concrete proposals are nowhere laid out<sup>28</sup>. Harvey recognizes that struggles over the urban commons and the production of new urban political subjectivities move to the forefront of Hardt and Negri's politics and welcomes this move. He thinks they are right to emphasize the importance of such changes, though they do not probe very far into the political economy or materiality of it all:

While I find this a progressive and illuminating move, it does raise the question of how relevant Marx's analysis might be in relation to it. In the first chapter of *Capital* (1867), Marx defines value as a social relation. As such, he says, value is immaterial but objective. This is so because it is impossible to measure a social relation directly. The power and significance of the social relation can be judged only in terms of its objective consequences. Marx is deeply concerned with how this social relation is reproduced ... I would have preferred that Hardt and Negri take Marx's formulation of "immaterial but objective" at its word and spend rather more time than they do on the "objective" moment. For Marx this objectification entails, among other things, reification, fetishism, and alienation, particularly through the production of the money form. But these key elements in Marxian theory unfortunately get short shrift in Hardt and Negri's presentation<sup>29</sup>.

For Harvey, the fact that the value congealed in commodities is symbolic, aesthetic, and social, as well as material, is not new at all and he finds nothing particularly compelling about this first guise in which immateriality appears. He proceeds his critique with emphasis to the fact that there is a disturbing similarity to the greatest of all the commons that capitalism creates not by fiat but through practices: money. Money is the objective particular that stands in for the universal common of value; it is the objective use value that is the measure of immaterial exchange value, and once it enters into circulation it never leaves it. "How the multitude made up of singularities will relate to this common remains unconsidered, even though it crucially

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<sup>28</sup> D. Harvey, *Commonwealth, an exchange in*  
<http://www.rebelnet.gr/articles/view/Commonwealth--An-Exchange>

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

affects the way the urban commons is shaped by political, economic, and social practices and the way fictitious capital works in relation to rental appropriations<sup>30</sup>”.

This is the deepest critique and refers, in my opinion, not only to Hardt and Negri, but to Žižek too. Off – course, in Žižek’s perspective there is no multitude. Harvey notes this difference:

Hardt and Negri dismiss Slavoj Žižek's contention that there is something far more foundational about class than there is about all the other forms of identity in relation to the perpetuation of capitalism, and in this I think in Žižek is right. No matter how important race, gender, and sexual identity may have been in the history of capitalism's development, and no matter how important the struggles waged in their name, it is possible to envisage the perpetuation of capitalism without them - something that is impossible in the case of class<sup>31</sup>.

How does Žižek then deal with the fundamental problems that Harvey raises? Is his notion of the proletariat able to confront with Harvey’s challenges? He does not drop the notion of the proletariat, but redefines it linked to the progressing “enclosure” of the commons. This enclosure is seen as a process of proletarianization of those who are thereby excluded from their own substance:

Today’ s historical situation compels us to radicalize it to an existential level well beyond Marx’ s imagination. We need a more radical notion of the proletarian subject, a subject reduced to the evanescent point of the Cartesian cogito, deprived of its substantial content. For this reason, the new emancipatory politics will no longer be the act of a particular social agent, but an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of proletarians having “nothing to lose but their chains”, we are in danger of losing everything: the threat is that we will be reduced to an abstract empty Cartesian subject deprived of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being makes us all in a way proletarians, reduced to a :substanceless subjectivity”, as Marx put it in Grundrisse. The figure of the “part of no-part” confronts us with the truth of our own position, and the ethico – political challenge is to recognize ourselves in this figure – in a way we are all excluded, from nature as well as from our symbolic substance. Today, we are all potentially a

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in *ibid*

homo sacer, and the only way to defend against actually becoming so is to act preventively<sup>32</sup>.

From the antagonisms we have already referred Žižek insists on the gap that separates the Excluded from the Included. Without this all other antagonisms lose their subversive edge. Ecology turns into a problem of sustainable development, intellectual property into a complex legal challenge, and biogenetics into an ethical issue. This notion ends in the necessity of a new unity between today's three fractions of the working class: intellectual labourers, the old manual working class, and the outcasts (unemployed, or living in slums and other interstices of the public space). Žižek notes that in the new conditions of "post – industrial" capitalism, this unity is already their victory<sup>33</sup>.

Let's think a bit about these antagonisms and the priority to the gap between the Excluded and the Included. If we put in this way, then isn't this a gap between proletarians too? I think that in order to answer this question, we must turn to Žižek's Lacanian reinterpretation of class struggle and his view of the Lacanian Real. We can't examine here Žižek's reading of Lacan, but we can pay some attention to his interpretation of the class – relation as the Real of Marxism. According to Alex Callinicos' critical aspects, when Žižek claims that class struggle is the unfathomable limit which prevents us from conceiving society as a closed totality, then class antagonism must be conceived not simply as discernible only in its effects, but as beyond conceptualization altogether<sup>34</sup>. But then, Callinicos asks, how can we say that the modern class antagonism is one between capital and labour rather than, say, one between masters and slaves?

Žižek seems to have no specific answer. This leads to him to a new kind of left decisionism, which links him to Badiou. The Idea of communism becomes an "eternal Idea" And its fourth fundamental concepts are according to Žižek: strict egalitarian justice, disciplinary terror, political voluntarism, and trust in the people.

This matrix is not "superseded" by any new postmodern or postindustrial or post – whatever – you – want dynamics. However, till now, till the present

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<sup>32</sup> S. Žižek, How to begin from the beginning in C.Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 214

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 226

<sup>34</sup> A. Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique*, Polity Press, 2006, p. 117

historical moment, this eternal Idea functioned as, precisely, a Platonic Idea which persisted, returning again and again after every defeat<sup>35</sup>.

This is a result of completely disjoining proletariat as revolutionary subject and the empirical working class. We can also see it as a result of Žižek's failure to re – think class – struggle in contemporary world and his perception of commons in terms of a consistent theory of social classes. The paper proposes that a crucial contribution to such a theory can be found in Lukács' later work and his attempt to develop an ontology of social being from a Marxist point of view<sup>36</sup>.

When starting this project, mainly after 1956, Lukács returned to his critical roots of the 1920's, though in a modified way. Following an ontological procedure, Lukács decided to set out a theory of the levels of being, of a progressive stratification (inorganic nature, biological nature, social being), with the principal objective to specify the categories constitutive of social being in their irreducible specificity. His basic point is that in order to revitalize Marxism it is necessary to develop from it an ontology that could explain labor as the fundamental category of being, as originary phenomenon, as the generative cell of social life and as the Key to anthropogenesis. Work, a category so often neglected in post – modern debates, becomes then the center of gravity of his ontology.

Michael Thomson, who has edited the Volume *Georg Lukács Reconsidered* with contemporary insights into Lukács' work from an international team of contributors has mentioned that despite his influence throughout the twentieth century, his contributions to the humanities and theoretical social sciences are marked by neglect. What has been lost is a crucial thinker in the tradition of critical theory, but also, by extension, a crucial set of ideas that can be used to shed new light on the major problems of contemporary society:

If critical theory is to have any lasting relevance today, it lies in its ability to contrast meaningful forms of life with the presently existing structure of social reality ... from this point of view, the work of Lukacs' later period - in particular his researches into ontological questions - is a systematic attempt to reinvent the

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<sup>35</sup> S. Žižek, How to begin from the beginning in C. Douzinas, S. Žižek (editors), *The idea of Communism*, Verso, 2009, p. 217

<sup>36</sup> G. Lukács, *Ontology of Social Being, Volume 2 Marx*. London: Merlin Press, 1978

G. Lukács, *Ontology of Social Being, Volume 3 Labor*. London: Merlin Press, 1978

tradition of critical theory and bring it back to its roots as a confrontation with the structural - functional arrangements of capitalist society<sup>37</sup>.

Lukács' later work was never neglected in Brazil and thinkers such as Sergio Lessa, Ivo Tonet, J. Chasin (1937 – 1998) have deeply researched ontology related with Marxism and its various implications. Especially, this paper proposes that Lessa gives an insight into the Ontological Foundation of the Social Classes and a critique of "Immaterial Labour" which is very useful in contemporary debates<sup>38</sup>.

He refers to the ontological articulation between labour (metabolical interchange man-nature) and abstract labour, which can be found in Marx and Lukács. He explores labour in order to show how does the relationship man – nature play the role of founding category of social being in modern capitalistic societies. In other words, he shows that the current capital crisis and its "productive restructuring" have not cancelled labour, the organic exchange between man and nature, as the founding category of the world of men, as Marx had pointed out. He poses a crucial question for the "social classes" debate. Would the insertion in the productive structure still differentiate the classes amongst themselves or, on the contrary, thanks to the capitalist crisis which would have approximated the productive and the unproductive labour, the intellectual and the manual labour, all the salary earners, in spite of their different economic roles, would be part of a new, enlarged, class: the "workers"?

This question is related to the one that refers to the technological development (mainly computer and robots) and whether such changes have melted in a new productive activity the manual to the intellectual labour and the productive to the unproductive labour. According to Lessa, despite such changes or any managerial ways of organizing production, social classes are still founded by its insertion in the productive structure and this is the only way we can conceive them. All various changes are not denied by Lessa but are interpreted from a point of view that recognizes the ontological reality of human social life. Then, this reality, as Thomson mentions is therefore to see that what is most essential to man is his ability not to

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<sup>37</sup> M. Thomson, *Ontology and Totality. Reconstructing Lukacs' Concept of Critical Theory* in [http://web.phil-inst.hu/lu/archivum/Lukacs125/Michael%20Thompson\\_Ontology%20and%20Totality.pdf](http://web.phil-inst.hu/lu/archivum/Lukacs125/Michael%20Thompson_Ontology%20and%20Totality.pdf)

<sup>38</sup> S. Lessa, *"Trabalho Imaterial", Negri, Lazzarato e Hardt* in <http://seer.fclar.unesp.br/estudos/article/view/414/1212>, also translated in Greek (Σ. Λέσα, *Η "άυλη εργασία": Νέγκρι, Λατσαράτο και Χαρντ*, Ουτοπία, Τεύχος 71 στο <http://www.u-topia.gr/issues/71/27>

change reality in some simplistic, poetic fashion but to see that the ability to rise to the condition of sublating subjective and objective reality can be glimpsed in conscious labor<sup>39</sup>. It is in this way that our contemporary society is in no way a post – labour society and every approach towards “intellectual - immaterial labour” must be rooted to its material conditions and its relation to the fundamental role of production.

### **Concluding remarks**

It might seem a bit strange to start a paper with Žižek, Hardt and Negri and finish it with the Lukács’ ontological insights. However, as Alex Calinicos shows in his *Resources of Critique* Žižek, Badiou, Hardt and Negri have confronted the ontological questions that Anglophone egalitarian liberals seek to evade. We have not explored the ontological presuppositions of their views in this paper. Our main point is that Žižek’ s left decisionism, a Radical Act without preconditions, should be linked with his perception of social classes, which is firmly related to his perception of “commons”. Antonis Balasopoulos in his *Varieties of Lacanian Anti-Utopianism* has written about “a “red” Lacanianism linked to re-appropriation of Hegel, in the first case, and of Plato in the second” in the work of Žižek and Badiou.

In this paper, we propose another re – appropriation of Marx and Hegel, in the first case, and of Aristoteles in the second. Such a re – appropriation can be found in Lukács’ late work. Lukacs adopts a view - one shared by Aristotle, Hegel and Marx - that there is an intrinsic, categorical distinction between the empirical existence of any thing (Dasein) and the potential reality (Wirklichkeit) that thing can achieve under proper conditions<sup>40</sup>. It is then the Aristotelian notion of dynamis, which is re – interpreted in Lukacs’ work in relation to the crucial concept of the alternatives. These alternatives don’t derive from a motto similar to Žižek’ s strict egalitarian justice, disciplinary terror, political voluntarism, and trust in the people.

Thanks to work, man has acquired distance with respect to the objective causal linkage, which is necessary in order to choose between several possible acts. The alternative decision, the essence of the teleological act, implies by definition deliberation, progressive experimentation, hesitation (eventually) between several possibilities: at the same time it takes form inevitably as a horizon of concrete

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<sup>39</sup> M. Thomson, *Ontology and Totality. Reconstructing Lukacs’ Concept of Critical Theory*, p. 18, 19

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19

circumstances which the subject finds before it and which he did not himself create<sup>41</sup>. It's in this way that Georg Lukács' thought is not out of date, unable to grasp today's capitalist dynamics, but is a vital contribution to contemporary debates. It's in this way that Andre Tosel sees Lukács work as the most powerful expression of Marx' potential - one equal to our age:

The human race arrives at the threshold of an ontological alternative, beyond classes and nations: either it remains a species in itself - mute, subject to manipulation by the estrangement that separates individuals from any subjective appropriation of accumulated capacities, or it becomes species for itself - allowing human beings to realise themselves as beings capable of responding to the challenge of their modern ontological situation and to produce the teleological projects that derive from their personality. Accordingly, ontology is not an abstract metaphysical translation of Marx, but the most powerful expression of his potential - one equal to our age, which obliges us to ask ourselves the ontological question: to be or not to be. To be for the general manipulation that negates the possibilities of the species for itself, or to be for a "a capacity to" by realising the determinative alternative, which is to treat the humanity in each and every one of us as an end<sup>42</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> N. Tertulian, "Lukács Ontology" in T. Rockmore (ed.), *Lukács today, essays in Marxist philosophy*: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1988, p. 256

<sup>42</sup> A. Tosel, "The Late Lukács and the Budapest School" in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, Stathis Kouvelakis, Jacques Bidet (ed.), Historical Materialism book series, 2008, p. 166

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