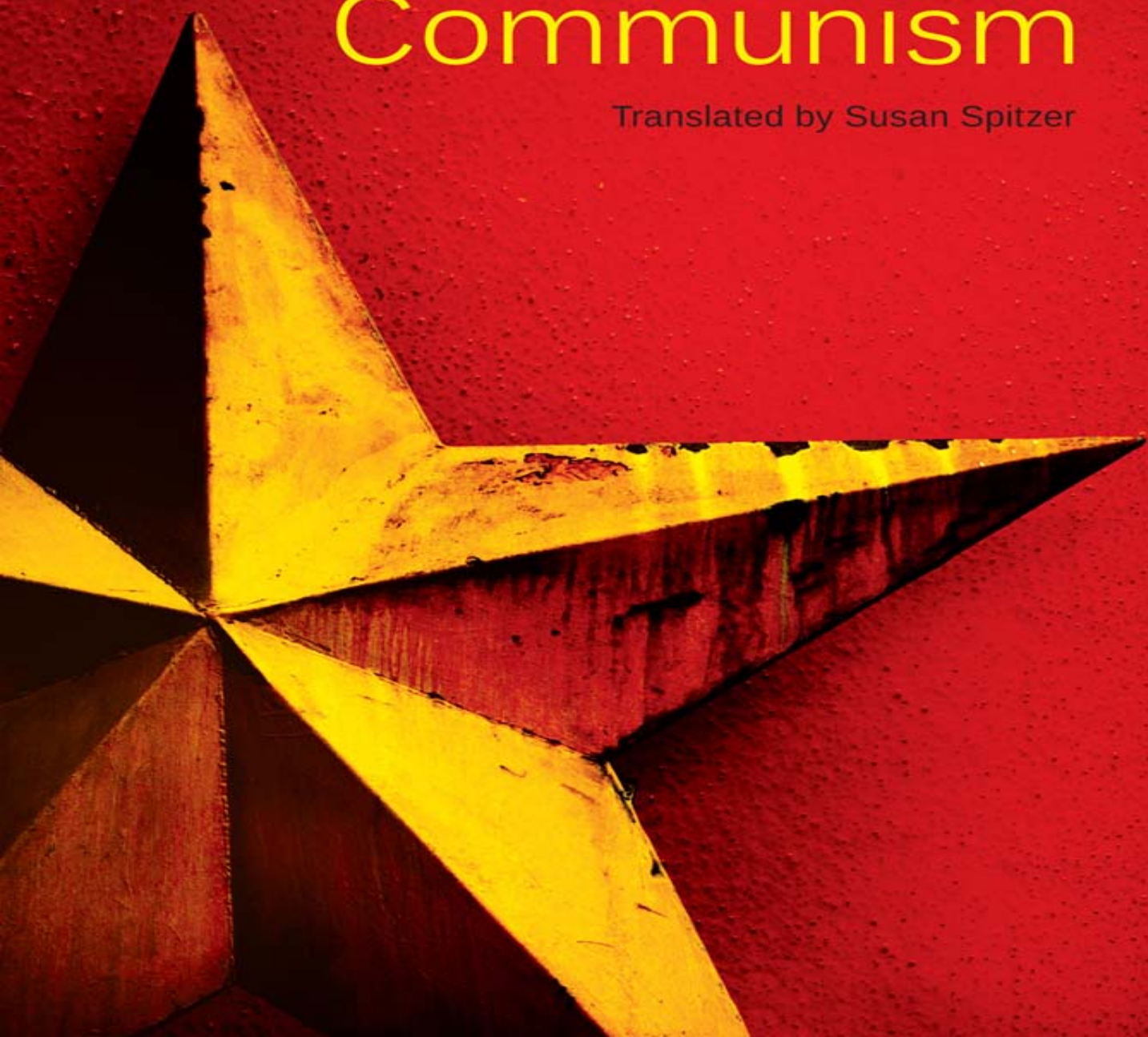


Alain Badiou
Peter Engelmann

Philosophy and the Idea of
Communism

Translated by Susan Spitzer



Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[1 23 March 2012](#)

[2 24 March 2012](#)

[End User License Agreement](#)

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1

23 March 2012

Peter Engelmann Before we turn to the specific topic of our discussion, “the Idea of communism” in your philosophical work, I’d like to contextualize these questions in terms of both philosophy and politics. In your philosophy you develop a concept of the subject different from that of capitalist society, which views the subject reductively as a consumer and an economic competitor. The concept of the subject has a long history in philosophy, and in France there has been, as well, a theory of the death of the subject. What I’m interested in is how your concept of the subject has been inscribed in the French philosophical context since the 1960s to 1970s.

Alain Badiou I’d like to make two comments about this. First of all, my first great philosophical influence was Sartre, in the 1950s. During all my early years of studying philosophy I considered the category of the subject to be fundamental, and it was, in particular in the form of the free consciousness, as Sartre was developing it at the time. I can therefore say that, philosophically, I come from, or come out of, a philosophy dominated by the theory of the subject, with a phenomenological vocabulary. So it was the subject in Sartre’s sense, but also in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, or even in Husserl’s sense. Starting in the late 1950s, when I arrived at the École Normale, met Althusser, read Derrida’s first books, and encountered Lacan’s teaching, I became involved in what was called structuralism at the time, that is, a philosophy in which the subject is problematic. In Althusser’s view, the subject was an ideological concept, a bourgeois concept. In the view of Lévi-Strauss and the structuralist tradition, it was

structures that mattered, and, in the Heideggerian tradition, the subject was a concept from metaphysics that needed to be deconstructed. So I came into contact with all these things at that time, but with a sort of instinctive resistance that had a philosophical origin – the teaching of Sartre and of the great phenomenology of the period – as well as more personal or practical roots, which were that I couldn't see how you could do without the category of the subject in politics.

PE Why wasn't it possible to give up the subject in politics?

AB In politics in particular, because it was very clear to me that politics was a matter of orientation, action, decisions, and principles, a matter that demanded a subject or a subjective dimension. I observed, moreover, that the attempt to reduce politics – and Marxism – to a purely objective, purely structural, context, without the figure of a subject, led to nothing but a sort of pure economism, in which it wasn't even clear what political action properly speaking, as decisive, voluntary, and constructive action, was. For all these reasons, I got involved in structuralism nonetheless, along with my friends at the time, but with the idea that it ought to be possible to reconcile the teachings of structuralism and/or deconstruction with a renewal of the concept of the subject, by transforming and retaining the category of the subject. Ultimately, I think the most important teaching for me back then was Lacan's, because Lacan was someone who, on the one hand, attached great importance to structures and particularly to the structures of language – the unconscious is structured like a language, etc. – but who, on the other hand, as heir to the psychoanalytic tradition, naturally retained the category of the subject. He not only retained it but even transformed it, making it into something absolutely central. So I regarded this teaching as a chance to find a way in which some of the lessons of speculative modernity could be accepted while at

the same time the category of the subject could still be retained, in exchange, of course, for an important transformation of that theory. I think this has remained my project to this day.

PE I have long wondered how you define your position in this connection. You said that it was impossible to act without the concept of the subject, particularly with regard to politics. But I'd like to go back to philosophy. You alluded to some philosophers who developed a critique of the concept of the subject, but then you switched abruptly to politics.

AB No, I simply gave politics as *one* example of a field of creativity and activity in which the whole problem is precisely the construction of a subject.

PE Would you agree if I said that a concept of the subject is needed in every field of human endeavor?

AB We'd have to make a detour, in that case, because the concept of the subject in my work is closely linked to two other concepts – that of event and that of truth. A subject is always a subject of truth. It is always the subject for or in a process of constructing a truth. My way of critiquing the metaphysical concept of the subject is to say that the subject is a creation or a construction, and that it's not a given. What is given is in the form of the individual, for example. But "individual" and "subject" are not one and the same for me. Ultimately, they're even in a completely fundamental opposition to each other, even though individuals are always called to become subjects or to be incorporated into a subject. It's a summons, not a constant, natural movement. And this summons occurs via a real process, which might be political but might also be something else. It might be a political process, or an artistic process, or an amorous process. In all these cases there is a subjective summons.