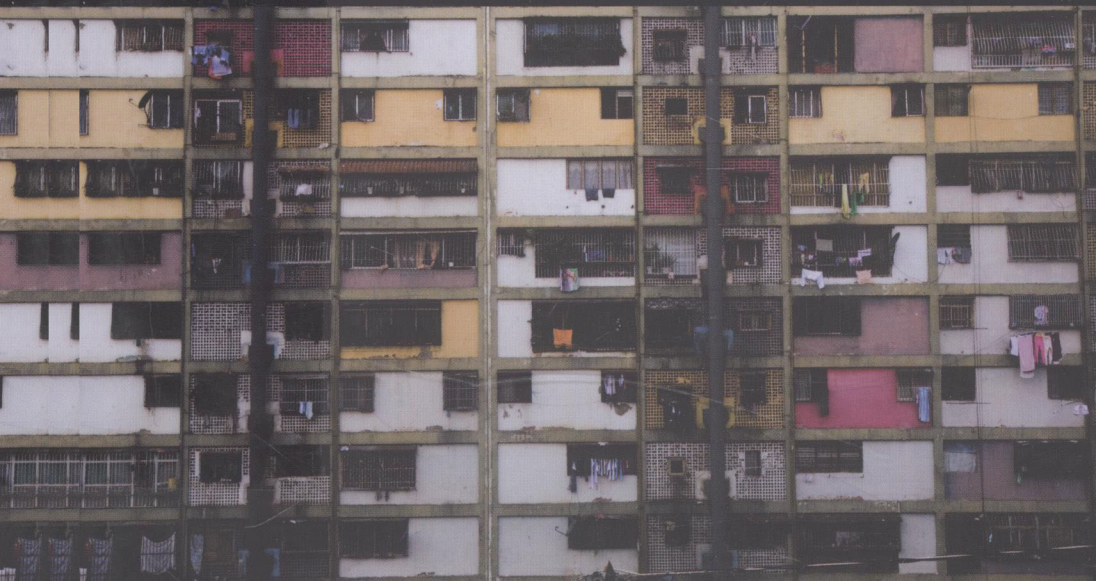




HERMENEUTIC COMMUNISM

FROM HEIDEGGER TO MARX

GIANNI VATTIMO ★ SANTIAGO ZABALA



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Columbia University Press NEW YORK



COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
PUBLISHERS SINCE 1893
NEW YORK CHICHESTER, WEST SUSSEX

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Vattimo, Gianni, 1936–

Hermeneutic communism : from Heidegger to Marx / Gianni Vattimo and Santiago Zabala.

p. cm. — (Insurrections)

Includes bibliographical references (p. 199) and index.

ISBN 978-0-231-15802-2 (alk. paper) — ISBN 978-0-231-52807-8 (e-book)

1. Communism—Philosophy. 2. Philosophy, Marxist. 3. Hermeneutics. I. Zabala, Santiago,
1975– II. Title. III. Series.

HX73.V385 2011

335.401—dc22

2011008349



Columbia University Press books are printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper.

This book is printed on paper with recycled content.

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

References to Internet Web sites (URLs) were accurate at the time of writing. Neither the author nor
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manuscript was prepared.

HERMENEUTIC COMMUNISM

INSURRECTIONS: *Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture*

INSURRECTIONS: *Critical Studies in Religion, Politics, and Culture*

Slavoj Žižek, Clayton Crockett, Creston Davis, Jeffrey W. Robbins, Editors

THE INTERSECTION OF RELIGION, POLITICS, AND CULTURE IS ONE OF THE MOST DISCUSSED AREAS IN THEORY TODAY. IT ALSO HAS THE DEEPEST AND MOST WIDE-RANGING IMPACT ON THE WORLD. INSURRECTIONS: CRITICAL STUDIES IN RELIGION, POLITICS, AND CULTURE WILL BRING THE TOOLS OF PHILOSOPHY AND CRITICAL THEORY TO THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RELIGIOUS TURN. THE SERIES WILL ADDRESS A RANGE OF RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND POLITICAL VIEWPOINTS IN THE UNITED STATES, EUROPE, AND OTHER PARTS OF THE WORLD. WITHOUT ADVOCATING ANY SPECIFIC RELIGIOUS OR THEOLOGICAL STANCE, THE SERIES AIMS NONETHELESS TO BE FAITHFUL TO THE RADICAL EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL OF RELIGION.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WE WORKED ON THIS BOOK BETWEEN THE REELECTION of President George W. Bush in 2004 and President Obama's decision to increase the soldiers deployed in Afghanistan in 2010. Although the material published here has never been released before, there are two books that have determined the production of this text: Gianni's *Ecce Comu: Come si diventa ciò che si era* (2007) and Santiago's *The Remains of Being: Hermeneutic Ontology After Metaphysics* (2009). In the former, Vattimo emphasized the political necessity of reevaluating communism; in the latter, Zabala insisted on the progressive nature of hermeneutics. *Hermeneutic Communism* can be considered a radical development of both.

This book would not have been written without the constant interest of our editor at Columbia University Press, Wendy Lochner. She has

not only promoted the publication of the book but actually stimulated and supported our research over the past years. We are very fortunate to have her as editor and hope to continue to work with her in the future.

We are also very grateful to Michael Haskell for going through the whole manuscript and suggesting several corrections that improved the text. His help was crucial.

Finally, but not least, we are grateful to Pablo Cardoso, Manuel Cruz, Franca D'Agostini, Carmelo Dotolo, William Egginton, Robert Fellman, Daniel Gamper, Jean Grondin, Philip Larrey, Michael Marder, Ana Messuti, Richard Palmer, Mauro Piola, Richard Polt, Jeffrey W. Robbins, Robert Valgenti, and Ugo Ugazio for having helped us in different ways.

This book is dedicated to Castro, Chávez, Lula, and Morales.

HERMENEUTIC COMMUNISM

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INTRODUCTION

FOR, MEANWHILE, IT HAS ALSO BEEN DEMANDED OF PHILOSOPHY THAT IT NO LONGER BE SATISFIED WITH INTERPRETING THE WORLD AND ROVING ABOUT IN ABSTRACT SPECULATIONS, BUT RATHER THAT WHAT REALLY MATTERS IS CHANGING THE WORLD PRACTICALLY. BUT CHANGING THE WORLD IN THE MANNER INTENDED REQUIRES BEFOREHAND THAT THINKING BE CHANGED, JUST AS A CHANGE OF THINKING ALREADY UNDERLIES THE DEMAND WE HAVE MENTIONED. (CF. [275] KARL MARX, *THE GERMAN IDEOLOGY*: "A. THESES ON FEUERBACH AD FEUERBACH, II": "THE PHILOSOPHERS HAVE ONLY INTERPRETED THE WORLD IN VARIOUS WAYS; THE POINT IS TO CHANGE IT.") BUT IN WHAT WAY IS THINKING SUPPOSED TO CHANGE IF IT DOES NOT TAKE THE PATH INTO THAT WHICH IS WORTHY OF THOUGHT? NOW, THE FACT THAT BEING PRESENTS ITSELF AS THAT WHICH IS WORTHY OF THOUGHT IS NEITHER AN OPTIONAL PRESUPPOSITION NOR AN ARBITRARY INVENTION. IT IS THE VERDICT OF A TRADITION THAT STILL GOVERNS US TODAY, AND THIS FAR MORE DECISIVELY THAN ONE MIGHT CARE TO ADMIT.

—MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *KANT'S THESIS ABOUT BEING*, 1944

IF MARXIST PHILOSOPHERS UNTIL NOW HAVE FAILED to change the world, it isn't because their political approach was wrong but rather because it was framed within the metaphysical tradition. Contrary to other thinkers of the twentieth century, Heidegger did not propose a new philosophy capable of correcting metaphysics but instead indicated the difficulty of such pretentiousness. Only once we recognize how metaphysics cannot be overcome in the sense of *überwunden*, defeating and leaving at large, but only in the sense of *verwindung*, that is, incorporating, twisting, or weakening, does it become possible to change the world: "Overcoming is worthy only when we think about incorporation."¹ This is why by weakening our objectivistic *forma mentis* (which has always belonged to those in power), a productive postmetaphysical philosophy will not only surpass metaphysics but also favor its

discharge, that is, the weak who have become the vast majority of the population throughout the world. After all, no weak individual, group, or nation has ever believed that the world is in order the way it is or that there is a form of objective rationality that must be cherished, followed, and applied. While metaphysics or, which is the same, the politics of descriptions is the philosophy of the winners who wish to conserve the world as it is, the weak thought of hermeneutics becomes the thought of the weak in search of alternatives.

In this book, we do not claim that communism can be translated into a particular philosophical stance or hermeneutics into a political position but that both draw our attention to a current lack of emergency, that is, the increasing homologizing of the political, economic, and social structures of power. As the political alternative to the impositions of neoliberal capitalism and the philosophy of the interpretative nature of truth, communism and hermeneutics, more than revolutionary positions at the service of power, have become alternative responses for the losers of history, that is, the weak. The fact that communism is often presented as tyrannical and hermeneutics is reduced to pure nihilism by their critics is not an indication of their dangers but rather of their ineffectiveness for today's bearers of power. While the winners of history want the conservation of the world as it is, the losers demand a different interpretation, that is, hermeneutic communism. Contrary to many interpreters of Marx, who present themselves as "scientific socialists," this is a book by two "hermeneutic communists," that is, those who believe that politics cannot be founded on scientific and rational grounds but only on interpretation, history, and event. This is why, together with Richard Rorty, we also consider it a flaw that "the main thing contemporary academic Marxists inherit from Marx and Engels is the conviction that the quest for the cooperative

commonwealth should be scientific rather than utopian, knowing rather than romantic.”²

As we will show, hermeneutics contains all the utopian and romantic features that Rorty refers to because, contrary to the knowledge of science, it does not claim modern universality but rather postmodern particularism. But what brings together communism and hermeneutics? The answer: the dissolution of metaphysics, that is, the deconstruction of the objective claims of *truth*, *Being*, and *logocentrism*, which Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida circumscribed in their philosophies. But if communism today represents an alternative to capitalism, it is not only because of its weakness as a political force in contemporary governments but also because of its theoretical weakness. With the triumph of capitalism, communism lost both effective power and all those metaphysical claims that characterized its original Marxist formulation as the *ideal of development*, which inevitably also draws toward a logic of war. Today, it's just these ideals and logics that characterize and guide not only conservative governments but also those reformist governments that are losing the support they had after the fall of the Berlin wall.

Communism and hermeneutics or, better, “hermeneutic communism” leaves aside both the *ideal of development* and also the general call for revolution. Unlike Alain Badiou, Antonio Negri, and other contemporary Marxist theorists, we do not believe that the twenty-first century calls for revolution because the forces of the politics of descriptions are too powerful, violent, and oppressive to be overcome through a parallel insurrection: only such a weak thought as hermeneutics can avoid violent ideological revolts and therefore defend the weak.³ In our post-metaphysical condition, the defeated of history are left, as Slavoj Žižek critically noticed, only with “weak thought . . . a thought attentive to the rhizomatic texture of reality; we should no longer aim at all explaining

systems and global emancipatory projects; the violent imposition of grand solutions should leave room for norms of specific resistance and intervention.”⁴ While communism motivates the resistance to capitalism’s inequalities, hermeneutics intervenes, indicating the interpretative nature of truth.

Although the versions of “communism” and “hermeneutics” we will refer to go further than Marx and Heidegger intended, both can be found in the thought of each because of the project of emancipation from metaphysics they share. For example, that Heidegger commented on Marx’s passage on interpretation, reproduced in this introduction’s epigraph, shows both the possibility of a theory of interpretation in Marx’s philosophy and also Heidegger’s interest in allowing such a theory to find its place in Marx’s thought. The adjective *hermeneutisch* (hermeneutic) appeared only once in Marx’s works, the noun *hermeneutic* (hermeneutics) never appeared;⁵ and in his *Theses on Feuerbach* he remarked, “the philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.” This does not mean, however, that Marx had no theory of interpretation. Contrary to the majority of Marx’s classical interpreters, we do not believe he was discrediting hermeneutics with this statement but only evoking how, for interpretation to work, a change must occur. Unlike in description, for which reality must be imposed, interpretation instead must make a new contribution to reality. And what about the presence of communism in Heidegger’s thought? He discredited communism, along with capitalism and democracy, not because of his early sympathies for Nazism but rather because of his need to overcome metaphysics. After all, Heidegger wrote during the period in which Soviet communism was enmeshed in the *ideal of development, that is, in its metaphysical realization against Western capitalist democracies and German National Socialism. The “other” thought and,*

therefore, politics that he evoked was not another metaphysical organization of beings but rather the thought of Being, that is, where Being's event becomes philosophy's groundless realm. If Marx emphasized the significance of keeping our feet anchored to the earth, it is Heidegger who indicated through the thought of Being how such earth is constantly moving and changing, constantly in conflict. The task of philosophy today is not to describe such movement but rather to learn to interpret it productively. Perhaps the time has come, after the deconstruction of metaphysics, to rephrase Marx's statement in order to emphasize how "the philosophers have only described the world in various ways; the moment now has arrived to interpret it."

Although communism has often been applied to all the domains of society and hermeneutics has been restricted to a simple technique of interpretation, we will invert this account, restricting communism to its social function and emphasizing the philosophical essence of hermeneutics, which, as we said above, shares the same project of emancipation from metaphysics. This is why in this book we will not refer to historical Soviet communism nor to the contemporary Chinese model but rather to the present South American (democratically elected) communist governments, which are determined to defend the interests of their weakest citizens. We believe this is the region of the world that best represents the communism of the twenty-first century,⁶ which, as Eric Hobsbawm said, must first and foremost be a

critique of capitalism, critique of an unjust society that is developing its own contradictions; the ideal of a society with more equality, freedom, and fraternity; the passion of political action, the recognition of the necessity for common actions; the defense of the causes of the poorest and oppressed. This does not mean

anymore a social order such as the Soviet one, an economic order of total organization and collectivity: I believe this experiment failed. Communism as motivation is still valid, but not as program.⁷

As we will see, the governments of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, Evo Morales in Bolivia, and other Latin American politicians represent an alternative to capitalism and an effective defense of the weakest that no capitalist state can match.

Just as we will not refer to Soviet communism, neither will we refer to hermeneutics as the traditional technique of interpretation that has been applied to the discovery of the hidden meanings of biblical, juridical, or literary texts. Instead, we will treat hermeneutics as the whole existence of the human being. This ontological essence of hermeneutics was fully acknowledged at the beginning of the twentieth century by Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Gadamer and has now become the common language in contemporary philosophy, where not only has truth dissolved into its own interpretations but so too has philosophy.⁸ While descriptive impositions desire to acquire power by pretending to become identical with the object of knowledge, hermeneutics instead struggles for conflicts of interpretations, that is, against the conservation of natural laws, values, and principles. Hermeneutics is not a conservative political position, as it has been presented until now, but a progressive one, opposed to the objective state of affairs. This is why Rorty, who, together with Jacques Derrida, has inspired this book, could affirm that the “hermeneutical . . . attitude is in the intellectual world what democracy is in the political world,”⁹ in sum, the respect of minorities, differences, and the weak. But who are the “weak”?

The weak are the discharge of capitalism, that is, of metaphysical realism, and they are what Heidegger called “Being”; Derrida, the “margins of philosophy”; and Walter Benjamin, “the tradition of the oppressed.” These concepts reflect not only those disciplines that refuse to submit to science’s rational development but also all the underdeveloped states, useless shareholders, and slums that represent more than three-quarters of the world population. The opponents of the weak are not the strong but the powerful, that is, the winners of history, whose philosophical voice speaks through people like John Searle, Francis Fukuyama, and Robert Kagan, for whom politics has become the completion of science’s liberal ideal of objectivity. These winners consider themselves the bearers not only of “true” knowledge but also of “just” democratic procedures, economic systems, and humanitarian wars,¹⁰ which are actually wars against the weak. We will confront this metaphysical realism philosophically (in chapter 1) and through its political and economic impositions (in chapter 2), which have been criticized by, among others, Naomi Klein, Ellen Meiksins Wood, and Joseph Stiglitz, whose investigations we refer to throughout the book. The alternative to the systems of framed democracies will be explored in the second part, where we will investigate the progressive political project of hermeneutics and the “weakened communism”¹¹ that is guiding South America.

In sum, what called us to write this book is the lack of emergency that reigns over the world now. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the 2008 economic crisis have led not to massive change but to an intensification of the politics that created these events in the first place. The fact that President Obama and his allies have strengthened the military and neoliberal agendas after these events calls for all thinkers not only to