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Alain Badiou and the Miracle of the Event

Marx had the temerity to declare that philosophy would eventually wither away through the accomplishment of its own strategic development: it was now no longer merely a matter of interpreting the world, but of changing it. Today, by way of contrast, Alain Badiou proposes to reiterate the philosophical gesture *par excellence*; a 'Platonic gesture' in opposition to the tyranny of opinion and the renunciations of anti-philosophy. In this way, he sees himself as raising philosophy up once more after its abasement in the face of those 'fascinating forms of thought' that had captivated it. 'Scientific thought gave rise to the variants of positivism, political thought engendered the figure of a philosophy of the state, while art, lastly, has exercised an exceptional attraction since the nineteenth century. Fascinated, captivated, and even subjugated by art, politics, and the sciences, philosophy has been driven to the point of declaring itself inferior to its own dispositions.'^{1/}

In the wake of the 'Galilean event', philosophy in the Classical age fell under the domination of its scientific condition. In the aftermath of the French revolution, it came under the sway of its political condition. Lastly, with Nietzsche and Heidegger it withdrew in favor of the poem. Whence Badiou's diagnosis of a phi-

^{1/} Badiou, 'Nous pouvons redéployer la philosophie' (1993), 2.

^{2/} Truth is a matter of 'acts', explains Peter Hallward in his book *Subject to Truth*, 154-155; see also Eustache Kouvélakis, 'La politique dans ses limites, ou les paradoxes d'Alain Badiou' in *Actuel Marx* 28 (2000), 'Y-a-t-il une pensée unique en philosophie politique?', 39-54.

^{3/} See in particular Badiou, *Saint Paul* (1997).

losophy that has become 'captured by a network of sutures to its conditions, especially its scientific and political conditions', a philosophy sadly resigned to the idea that it is henceforth impossible for it to express itself in 'systematic form'. The principal effect of this submission apparently consists in the renunciation, pure and simple, of any 'desire for a figure of eternity' that might be non-religious, 'internal to time as such' and 'whose name is truth'. By losing sight of its own constitutive aim, philosophy has become estranged from itself. No longer knowing whether it possesses a place of its own, it has become reduced to its own history. As it turns into 'its own museum' it 'combines the deconstruction of its past with the empty wait for its future' (C, 57-58).

The aim of the program delineated by Badiou seeks to liberate philosophy from this threefold grip of science, history and the poem, to withdraw it from the twin anti-philosophical discourses of dogmatic positivism and Romantic speculation, to dispense with 'every kind of religion'. For 'we cannot lay claim to atheism so long as the theme of finitude continues to dominate our thinking'. Only by espousing once more 'the solid secular eternity of the sciences' will we attain atheism; only by reducing the infinite to its 'neutral banality' as a 'mere number' can we hope to tear ourselves free from a 'disgusting veneer of sacralization' and re-inaugurate a 'radical desacralization' (C, 163-164).

Along the path of this renewed philosophical conquest, Badiou's discourse is coordinated around the concepts of truth, event and subject: a truth is sparked by an event and spreads like a flame fanned by the breath of a subjective effort that remains forever incomplete. For truth is not a matter of theory but is a 'practical question' first and foremost: it is

something that occurs, a point of excess, an eventual exception, 'a process from which something new emerges'^{2/}, as opposed to an adequation between knowledge and its object. This is why 'each truth is at once singular and universal'.

This truth in *process* is opposed to the worldly principle of interest. Initially, Badiou's thought remained subordinated to the movement of history. But truth has become more fragmentary and discontinuous under the brunt of historical disasters, as though history no longer constituted its basic framework but merely its occasional condition. Truth is no longer a subterranean path manifesting itself in the irruption of the event. Instead, it becomes a post-evental consequence. As 'wholly subjective' and a matter of 'pure conviction', truth henceforth pertains to the realm of declarations that have neither precedents nor consequences^{3/}. Although similar to revelation, it still remains a process but one which is entirely contained in the absolute beginning of the event which it faithfully continues.

This is why, contrary to Kant, for whom the truth and universal relevance of the French Revolution was to be found in the enthusiastic and disinterested gaze of its onlookers, for Badiou, the truth of the event is that of its participants: it should be sought for or listened to in the living words uttered by Robespierre or Saint-Just, rather than in the detached commentaries produced by Furet and the Thermidorian historians; in the tragic decisions made by Lenin (and Trotsky), rather than the judgments made out of harm's way by Hélène Carrère d'Encausse and Stéphane Courtois.

This is an idea of truth that exceeds what can be proved or demonstrated. It posits conditions far more demanding than those that merely require the consistency of discourse,

the correspondence between words and things, or the reassuring verification of ordinary logics. In this sense, it is an entirely materialist concept: for Badiou, there can be no transcendental truth, only truths in situation and in relation, situations and relations of truth, oriented toward an atemporal eternity.

These are truths that cannot be deduced from any premise. They are axiomatic and foundational. Thus, all true novelty arises ‘in obscurity and confusion’. It is up to philosophy to recognize and declare its existence. By the same token, it is only retrospectively that the event is acknowledged as such, by way of an ‘interpretative intervention’. The petrification or substantialization—bureaucratic, statist [*étatique*], academic—of these eventual and processual truths is equivalent to their negation. It takes the form of that recurrent disaster whose proper name is Thermidor.

For Badiou, the distinction between truth and knowledge is crucial (cf. EE, 269; C, 201). Truths take place. Each of them surges forth as an ‘immediately universalizable singularity’, which is characteristic of the event through which it comes to be. This logic of universalisation is decisive, for once we have renounced the universal, it is always at the risk of ‘universal horror’ (TS, 197). Vengeful and subordinate particularisms that demand recognition of their rights remain impotent in the face of capital’s false and despotic universalism, to which must be opposed another universality. Philosophy appears here as a ‘wager endowed with a universal bearing’, at each step coming up against either ‘a specialized and fragmentary world’ in the catastrophic form of religious, communitarian or national

passion—claims according to which only a woman can understand a woman, only a homosexual can understand a homosexual, only a Jew can understand a Jew, and so on. If every universal first subsists in a singularity, and if every singularity has its origin in an event then ‘universality is an exceptional result originating in a single point, it is the consequence of a decision, a way of being rather than knowing.’^{4/}

Thus, the possibility of philosophy orbits around truth as a category that cannot be conflated with either common sense or scientific knowledge. Science, politics and aesthetics each have their own truth. It would be tempting to conclude from this that philosophy harbors the Truth of truths. But Badiou resists this temptation: ‘The relation between Truth and truths is not one of domination, subsumption, foundation or guarantee. It is a relation of sampling: philosophy is a tasting of truths.’ Hence, philosophy consists in a thinking that extracts, one which is ‘essentially subtractive’, one which punctures. As the poet Mandelstam said, it is the hole at the centre of the ring of bread that matters because that is what remains after the bread is eaten. Similarly, Badiou enjoins us to admit that philosophy’s central category is empty and must remain so in order to welcome the event.

Is philosophy then a question of listening rather than saying? Of listening to or echoing that which resonates within an empty space? Such listening would allow us to resist the philosophical discourses of postmodernity, which constitute the contemporary form of anti-philosophy. Through their pretension to ‘cure us of truth’ or to ‘compromise the very idea of truth’ by way of a general debunking of meta-narratives, these discourses become self-refuting because they capitulate to the confused

free-for-all of public opinion. What is being played out in this business is the duel between philosopher and sophist, ‘for what the sophist, whether ancient or modern, presumes to impose is the claim that there is no truth, that the concept of truth is useless or doubtful since there are only conventions’ (C, 62). This sardonic challenge, which puts truth to the test of opinion, constantly tempts the philosopher to declare the existence of a unique site of Truth, whereas all that is really required is the riposte that ‘by the operation of Truth as an empty category, there are truths’. Any reply (whether positivistic, statist, or poetic) claiming to shore up this void would in fact be ‘excessive, overstretched, disastrous’ (C, 72).

The fact that the site from which truths might be grasped must remain empty has the notable consequence that the struggle between philosopher and sophist can never end. It is, in effect, a struggle between the philosopher and his own shadow, his other, who is also his double. The ethics of philosophy consists in keeping this dispute alive. The annihilation of one or other of the disputants—by decreeing that ‘the sophist has no right to exist’, for instance—would be properly disastrous. For ‘the dialectic includes the utterances of the sophist’ and the authoritarian temptation to silence the latter ‘exposes thought to disaster’ (C, 74-75).

This disaster is not merely hypothetical. It is, alas, something that has already happened. Because he installs thought in this contradictory relation between the philosopher and the sophist, between truth and opinion, it would seem that Badiou is obliged to address, both in general and for himself, the question of democracy—but it is precisely this question that he continuously represses. A new danger threatens: that of a philosophy

^{4/} Badiou, ‘Huit thèses sur l’Universel’ (2000), 11-20; cf. Hallward, *Subject to Truth*, 250-251.

haunted by the sacralization of the evental miracle.

Truth, following in the wake of ‘that which happens’, is a matter of ‘pure conviction’, it is ‘wholly subjective’, and is a ‘pure fidelity to the opening brought about by the event’. Apart from the event, there are only current affairs and the common run of opinion. The event is Christ’s resurrection, it is the storming of the Bastille, it is the October revolution, just as it is illegal immigrant workers taking to the streets in order to become agents in their own right, in order to break out of their status as clandestine victims; it is or the unemployed stepping out from the ranks of statistics to become subjects of resistance, or the sick refusing to resign themselves to being mere patients and attempting to think and act their own illnesses.

In keeping with a similar logic, Pascal refused to provide argumentative proof for the existence of God, preferring instead to invoke the evental experience of faith. Pascalian grace or Mallarméan chance thereby present themselves as versions of the call of a ‘militant vocation’, as the emblematic form of the pure, truth-engendering event.

For Badiou, the relation between this event and the ontology of the multiple constitutes the central problem for contemporary philosophy. What exactly is an event? Aleatory by nature, the event cannot be predicted outside a singular situation, nor even deduced from that situation without some unpredictable chance operation. In this way the Mallarméan dice-throw illustrates the ‘pure thought of the event’, which bears no relation to leaden struc-

tural determination. This event is characterized by the unpredictability of what might just as well not have occurred. This is what lends it an aura of ‘laicized grace’ (SP, 89). It comes about retroactively through the sovereign naming of its existence and the fidelity to the truth which comes to light in it. Thus, according to Péguy, the uncountable zero of the French Revolution’s ‘nought anniversary’ merely pays witness to what can be done in its name through the imperious duty to carry on its legacy.

Accordingly, the genuine event remains irreducible to all instrumental reckoning. It is of the order of an encounter that is amorous (love at first sight), political (revolution), or scientific (the eureka). Its proper name suspends the situational routine insofar as it consists in ‘forcing chance once the moment is ripe for intervention’ (TS, 187). Yet this propitious ripeness of the opportune moment unexpectedly refers us back to the historicity that determines and conditions the latter. Inadvertently, it seems to contradict the oft-repeated claim that the event is entirely eruptive and cannot be deduced from the situation.

In what does this ripeness of circumstances consist? How is it to be gauged? Badiou remains silent on this score. By refusing to venture into the dense thickets of real history, into the social and historical determination of events, Badiou’s notion of the political tips over into a wholly imaginary dimension: this is politics made tantamount to an act of levitation, reduced to a series of unconditioned events and ‘sequences’ whose exhaustion or end remain forever mysterious. As a result, history and the event become miraculous in Spinoza’s sense—a miracle is ‘an event the cause of which cannot be explained’^{5/}. Politics can only flirt with a theology or aesthetics of the event. Re-

ligious revelation, according to Slavoj Žižek, constitutes its ‘unavowed paradigm’^{6/}.

Yet the storming of the Bastille can be understood only in the context of the Ancien Régime; the confrontation of June 1848 can be understood only in the context of urbanization and industrialization; the insurrection of the Paris Commune can be understood only in the context of the commotion of European nationalities and the collapse of the Second Empire; the October Revolution can be understood only in the particular context of ‘capitalist development in Russia’ and the convulsive outcome of the Great War.

The question of the subject, which functions as the third term in Badiou’s discourse, tends to confirm our suspicions: in the wake of Althusser’s ‘process without a subject’, Badiou presents us with a subject without history. Or maybe this is just another version of the same effort to hunt down historicism.

‘The subject is rare’, says Badiou.^{7/} Rare like the event, rare like truth, and as intermittent as politics, which, according to Rancière, is always ‘a provisional accident of the forms of domination’ and always ‘precarious’, always ‘punctual’, its manifestation only ever allowing for a ‘subject in eclipse’.^{8/} Yet this vanishing subject is that through which a truth becomes effective: I struggle, therefore I am. I am, because I struggle. Truth is thereby defined as a process of subjectivation. It is not the working class that struggles. The latter, as a category of sociological discourse, would be a subordinate, functional component of the structure (of the relentless reproduction of capital). What struggles is the proletariat as subjectivised mode of a class determining and proclaiming itself through struggle.

Similarly, for Pascal, the world does not necessarily lead to God without the rigorously

5/ Cf. Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, Chapter VI.

6/ Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*, 183.

7/ Badiou, *Une Soirée philosophique*, 24-25).

8/ Rancière, *Au bord du politique*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2000.

aleatory decision of the gambler who brings it into existence (PP, 87). Similarly, for Lukacs, the political subject is not the class, which remains imprisoned within the vicious cycle of reification, but the party that subverts the structure and breaks the cycle. The party sustains the proletariat as subject striving to dissolve those class relations by which the latter is held captive. The class only becomes subject through its party.

We must wager! Badiou appropriates Pascal's injunction: we must 'wager on a communist politics' because 'we will never be able to deduce it from capital'. By virtue of its uncertain relation to the empty site of truth, a site modelled on Pascal's hidden God, the wager provides the philosophical figure for every engagement, in stark contrast to the dogmatic certainty of positive knowledge and cynical, worldly, senile scepticism. It pertains to a type of thinking that is irreducible to the dogmatic certainties of positive science as well as to the fickle whims of public opinion: 'Pascal's wager cannot concern the sceptic, for whom the limited values of the world are enough, nor the dogmatist, who thinks the world provides him with values that are authentic and sufficient, since they obviously exclude the need to wager. Which is why, insofar as both are in possession of certainties or truths that are enough for them to live on, it is possible to see them as equivalent.'^{9/} He who glimpses truth in the throw of the dice is not necessarily a believer looking to God to provide the basis for his unshakeable confidence. On the contrary, he alone can wager for whom God has withdrawn, leaving behind a gaping hole from whence the

dialectical (rather than romantic) representation of modern tragedy can spring forth.

This wager has little to do with doubt. It is a sign of confidence in a practical certainty, albeit one liable to disappointment, one that is paradoxical, continuously threatened by a contrary possibility. To wager is to commit oneself. It is to gamble the whole on a single part. It is 'to bet on the assertion, which is always unprovable, that there exists a possible relation between meaning and that which is given through the senses, between God and the empirical reality behind which he hides; a relation which cannot be proved yet to which one must commit one's entire existence.' Thus, labour on behalf of the uncertain 'is never absolute certainty, but rather action, and thereby necessarily a wager'. In this sense, Lucien Goldmann already saw how Marxism 'continued the Pascalian legacy.'^{10/}

Yet in Badiou, the intermittence of event and subject renders the very idea of politics problematic. According to him, politics defines itself via fidelity to the event whereby the victims of oppression declare themselves. His determination to prise politics free from the state in order to subjectivize it, to 'deliver it from history in order to hand it over to the event', is part of a tentative search for an autonomous politics of the oppressed. The alternative effort, to subordinate politics to some putative 'meaning of history', which has ominous echoes in recent history, is he suggests to incorporate it within the process of general technicization and to reduce it to the 'management of state affairs'. One must have 'the courage to declare that, from the point of view of politics, history as meaning or direction [*sens*] does not exist: all that exists is the periodic occurrence of the *a priori* of chance.' However, this divorce between event and history (between the event

and its historically determined conditions) tends to render politics if not unthinkable then at least impracticable (PP, 18).

Badiou's philosophical trajectory appears, indeed, like a long march towards 'a politics without a party', the consummation of a subjectivation that is at once necessary and impossible. Isn't a politics without a party actually a politics without politics? In Badiou's account it is Rousseau who founded the modern concept of politics insofar as politics begins with the event of the contract rather than with the assembling of a structure: the subject is primarily its own legislator. Consequently, there is no truth more active than that of a politics which erupts like a pure instance of free decision when the order of things breaks down and when, refusing the apparent necessity of that order, we boldly venture forth into a hitherto unsuspected realm of possibility.

Politics as such comes about, then, on the basis of its separation from the state, which is the very opposite and negation of the event, the petrified form of anti-politics; politics proceeds via a 'brutal distancing of the state'. Nothing in the domain of the state can be against the state, just as nothing in the domain of economics can be against economics. So long as the economy and the state maintain their grip on the situation, politics is only a matter of controlled protests, captive resistances, reactions subordinated to the tutelary fetishes they pretend to defy. The only possible politics in such circumstances is, to use Gramsci's terminology, a subaltern politics. For Badiou, the separation between politics and the state lies at the very root of politics. More precisely: it lies at the root of a politics of the oppressed, which is the only conceivable form in which politics can endure once it

^{9/} Lucien Goldmann, 'Le Pari est-il écrit pour le libertin?', in *Recherches dialectiques*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967. p. 169 et suivantes

^{10/} *Idem*, p. 169 s.

has vanished under the pressure of totalitarianism or the market. [Systematically elaborated during the course of the 80s and 90s, Badiou's philosophical discourse must be understood in the context of the reactionary liberal restoration. It is opposed to market determinism, to communicational consensus, to the rhetoric of fairness, to the despotism of public opinion, to postmodern resignation and to the anti-totalitarian vulgate. It tries to combine an injunction to resistance and an art of the event.

Taking the lover's fidelity to the first encounter as its example, militant engagement consists in a political fidelity to an initial event, a fidelity experienced as resistance to the mood of the times: 'What I admire above all in Pascal is the effort, undertaken in difficult circumstances, to go against the current, not in a reactive sense, but in order to invent the contemporary form of an ancient conviction, as opposed to simply following the course of things and adopting the facile cynicism which all transitional periods inculcate in the weak-minded, the better to claim that the pace of history is incompatible with the quiet will to change the world and universalize its form' (EE, 245). Pascal is indeed indispensable when it comes to confronting an era of resignation and consensus. This Pascalian counter-current finds an exact echo in what Walter Benjamin sees as the obligation to 'go against the grain of history'. Both lay claim to a dialectics of fidelity, one capable of preventing conviction from collapsing into disillusionment and of safeguarding tradition from the conformism into which it constantly threatens to lapse.

11/ See the articles by Kouvélakis and Žižek in *Actuel Marx* 28 (2000): 'Y-a-t-il une pensée unique en philosophie politique?'

If the future of a truth 'is decided by those who carry on' and who hold to this faithful decision to carry on, the militant summoned by the 'rare' if not exceptional idea of politics seems to be haunted by the Pauline ideal of saintliness, which constantly threatens to turn into a bureaucratic priesthood of Church, State or Party. The absolute incompatibility between truth and opinion, between philosopher and sophist, between event and history, leads to a practical impasse. The refusal to work within the equivocal contradiction and tension which bind them together ultimately leads to a pure voluntarism, which oscillates between a broadly leftist form of politics and its philosophical circumvention. In either case, the combination of theoretical elitism and practical moralism can indicate a haughty withdrawal from the public domain, sandwiched between the philosopher's eventual truth and the masses' subaltern resistance to the world's misery. On this particular point, there exists an affinity between Badiou's philosophical radicality and Bourdieu's sociological radicality. Haunted by the 'epistemological cut' that forever separates the scientist from the sophist and science from ideology, both Badiou and Bourdieu declare a discourse of mastery. Whereas a politics that acts in order to change the world establishes itself precisely in the wound left by this cut, in the site and moment in which the people declare themselves.

Detached from its historical conditions, pure diamond of truth, the event, just like the notion of the absolutely aleatory encounter in the late Althusser, is akin to a miracle. By the same token, a politics without politics is akin to a negative theology. The preoccupation with purity reduces politics to a grand refusal and prevents it from producing lasting effects. Its rarity prevents us from thinking its expan-

sion as the genuinely achieved form of the withering away of the State. Slavoj Žižek and Stathis Kouvelakis have rightly pointed out that the antinomies of order and event, of police and politics, render radical politicization impossible and indicate a move away from the Leninist '*passage à l'acte*'¹¹. Unlike 'the liberal irresponsibility of leftism', a revolutionary politics 'assumes full responsibility for the consequences of its choices'. Carried away by his fervor, Žižek even goes so far as to affirm the necessity of those consequences 'no matter how unpleasant they may be'. But in light of this century's history, one cannot take responsibility for them without specifying the extent to which they are unavoidable and the extent to which they contradict the initial act whose logical outcome they claim to be. Thus, what must be re-examined is the whole problem of the relation between revolution and counter-revolution, between October and the Stalinist Thermidor.

Since 1977, Badiou's thought has developed by gradually distancing itself, albeit without any explicit break, from the Maoism of the 1960s. In a situation dominated by the twin political liberalisms of the center-right and the center-left, one in which vague feelings of resistance can assume the bigoted form of reactive nationalism or religious fundamentalism, Badiou's politics of the event signal an explicit stand against the complementary phenomena of imperial globalization and identitarian panic. Consensus, as Badiou himself proudly proclaims, is not his strong point. He strives, against the contemporary current, to save the Maoist event and the proper name of Mao from the petrifying grip of history. And he gallantly claims never to have stopped being a militant, from May 68 to NATO's war in the Balkans.

Throughout this long march, May 68 is equivalent to the encounter on the road to Damascus. It revealed that history, 'including the history of knowledge', is made by the masses. Henceforth, fidelity to the event will mean a stubborn refusal to surrender, the intractable refusal of reconciliation and repentance. After Mao's death, the year 1977 marks a new turning point, signaled in France by the electoral gains made by the *Union de la gauche*, and in the intellectual realm by the appearance of the '*nouvelle philosophie*'. In England and the United States, Thatcher and Reagan prepare to take power. The liberal reaction is proclaimed. The 'obscure disaster' is underway.

Badiou will subsequently strive to 'think politics' as a resistance to 'the linguistic turn', to analytical philosophy, to any relativist hermeneutics. Against wordplay, against the apologia for 'weak thought', against the capitulation of universal reason before the kaleidoscope of differences, against all the pretences of a triumphant sophism, Badiou wants to hold fast to truth. He mobilizes the systematicity of the 'Platonic gesture' against the fragmentation of philosophy and philosophical fragments, in which there is no room for

truth, in which cultural populism replaces art, in which technology supplants science, in which management wins out over politics and sexuality triumphs over love. Sooner or later, these distortions would lead to the policing of thought and the capitulation already anticipated, in the 1970s, by the little gurus of desire.

For Badiou by contrast, as for Sartre, man only attains genuine humanity, albeit an ephemeral one, through the event of his revolt. Whence the still unresolved difficulty of holding together event and history, act and process, instant and duration. As a result, by way of a novel, ironic ruse of history, the politics of historically indetermined singular situations becomes akin to the very postmodern fragmentation it sought to resist: 'what I call politics is something that can be discerned only in a few, fairly brief sequences, often quickly overturned, crushed or diluted by the return of business as usual.' ^{12/}

The 'early Badiou' had been tempted to subordinate philosophy to the sovereign course of history. Henceforth, it is the event that interrupts historical development. Thus, as Slavoj Žižek remarks, Badiou can be seen as a thinker of revelation, 'the last great author in the French tradition of Catholic dogmatists'. Yet the claim to found a politics on the pure imperative of fidelity, one that challenges every project inscribed within the continuity of historical perspective, seems perilous.

'God preserve us from socio-political programs!' exclaims Badiou, in a horrified gesture of refusal before temptation or sin ^{13/}. Carried by a pure maxim of equality, a politics without parties seems to have no goal to strive toward. It is entirely concentrated in the present of its declaration: "The only political ques-

tion is: what is it possible to achieve in the name of this principle [of equality] through our militant fidelity to this declaration?" ^{14/} Such a politics is supposed to be a matter of 'prescription' rather than program, prescriptions illustrated by unconditional commands such as 'every individual counts as one'; 'the sick must receive the best care without conditions'; 'one child equals one pupil'; 'anyone who lives here belongs here'. These maxims, which have the dogmatic form of religious commandments, provide principles of orientation that counter the unprincipled accommodations of *Realpolitik* or naked opportunism. But by refusing to confront reality and the prosaic experience of practice, they allow one to keep one's hands clean in a manner akin to Kantian morality.

Nevertheless, the realities of relations of force, from which it is not so easy to escape into the pristine realm of theological prescription, catch up with this conception of politics as pure will. Following an evolution that is again parallel in some ways to that of Pierre Bourdieu, *La Distance politique* praised the strikes during the winter of 1995 for their salutary resistance to a liberal 'decentralization' carried out exclusively for the benefit of capital and the market ^{15/}. It even went so far as to declare that, up to a point, the state is the guarantor of 'the public domain and the general interest'. The public domain and the general interest? Well! Is there not a faint whiff of sophistry here?

Yet this sudden reversal is not so surprising. Holy purification is never more than a short step away from voluptuous sin. If, as Badiou was already claiming in 1996, 'the era of revolutions is over', the only available options are either to withdraw into the haughty solitude of the anchorite or learn to get used to the con-

^{12/} Badiou, 'Nous pouvons redéployer la philosophie', 2.

^{13/} Badiou, 'Réponses écrites d'Alain Badiou,' Philosophie, philosophie (1992), 70.

^{14/} Hallward reads: 'The only genuinely political question is: what can be done, in the name of this principle [of equality], in our militant fidelity to its proclamation? This question can only be answered through a direct mobilisation or empowerment that has nothing to do the condescendingly 'compassionate' valorisation of certain people as marginal, excluded or misérables (Hallward, Subject to Truth, 228, referring to *La Distance politique*, 19-20 (Apr., 1996), 9; *La Distance politique*, 17-18 (Oct., 1996), 13)'.
^{15/} *La Distance politique* 15 (Dec., 1996), 11 (*La Distance politique* is the newsletter of L'Organisation politique, the organisation led by Badiou along with Natacha Michel and Sylvain Lazarus).

temptible state of current affairs ^{16/}. For how, in effect, does one imagine a State as ‘guarantor of the public domain and the general interest’ without parties or debates, without mediations or representations? When *L’Organisation politique* ventures onto the terrain of practical constitutional proposals, it comes as no surprise that all it has to offer are banal reforms, such as abolishing the office of President of the Republic (however indispensable this may be), demanding the election of a single Assembly, requiring that the Prime Minister be leader of the principal parliamentary party, or recommending an electoral system that guarantees the formation of parliamentary majorities ^{17/}. In other words, as Peter Hallward dryly remarks, ‘something remarkably similar to the British Constitution’.

This sudden conversion to realism is the profane converse of the heroic thirst for purity. Rather than a ‘warrior outside the walls of the state’, Badiou defines the militant as a ‘lookout for the void, guided by the event’. But by staring so continuously out into this desert of Tartars, from where the enemy who is to turn him into a hero will come, the lookout ends up dozing off before the mirages of the void.

As we hinted earlier, all these contradictions and aporias can be traced back to the refusal of history and to the unsettled score with Stalinism. For Badiou, the bankruptcy of the Marxist-Leninist paradigm goes back to 1967.

^{16/} Cf. Badiou, *Théorie axiomatique du sujet*, 26.11.97, and Badiou’s letter to Hallward, 17 June 1996, in Hallward, *Subject to Truth*, 41, 226.

^{17/} Cf. ‘Proposition de réforme de la Constitution’, *La Distance politique*, 12 (Feb., 1995), 5-6; Hallward, *Subject to Truth*, 239.

^{18/} ‘Réponses écrites d’Alain Badiou, *Philosophie, philosophie* (1992). C’est la revue du département de philosophie de Paris 8.

Why 1967? Is it because of the turning point in the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the crushing of the Shanghai commune? Why not earlier? To avoid having to examine Maoism’s historical record and its relations with Stalinism in greater depth? Françoise Proust has rightly noted that what is at stake here is a desperate attempt to get out of Maoism by ‘taking leave of history’. But the price of this great historical silence is exorbitant. It ends up rendering democracy unthinkable and impracticable, as absent from Badiou’s thought as it was from Althusser’s.

Françoise Proust emphasizes that by itself the imperative of ‘fidelity to fidelity’ only leads to a sterile formalism in the face of ‘a world that offers us nothing but the temptation to give in’. Fidelity to the revolutionary event is indeed continuously threatened by Thermidor and by the Thermidorians of yesterday and today. The same holds for Thermidorians in love, which is to say those who have fallen out of love, as for Thermidorians in politics. There are so many occasions for giving up! So many temptations to bow one’s head and submit to expediency! So many pretexts for resigning oneself, for becoming reconciled, through lassitude, through wisdom, for reasonable reasons, whether good or bad, so as not to pursue the politics of the worst available option, by choosing the lesser evil (which will turn out to be a shortcut to the worst option), to cut one’s losses, or simply to present oneself as ‘responsible’. But how, on what timescale, does one measure the responsibility of a politics?

This failure to clarify his relation to the legacies of Stalinism and Maoism lies at the root of Badiou’s inability to clarify his relation to Marx. He remains content to state—the very least he could do—that Marxism as a singular term does not exist, even though its crisis con-

ceals far more than any anti-Marxist could ever imagine. By the same token, he refuses the infidelity implied in the label ‘post-Marxist’. But despite the vague invocation of a dogmatic Marxism, there is an extent to which he legitimates the accusation of positivism: ‘Marx and his successors, who in this regard showed themselves to be dependent on the dominant suture of the time [i.e. of philosophy to science], always claimed to be elevating revolutionary politics to the rank of science’ (MP, 43/*). How much of this pretension is attributable to Marx, however, and how much to his epigones and the orthodoxy codified in Stalin’s immortal booklet *Historical Materialism and Dialectical Materialism*? Are they both talking about the same kind of science? How does Marx think? And how can ‘the Platonic gesture’ account for this dialectical thinking?

Badiou, who is generally a meticulous and penetrating reader, suddenly gives the impression of not quite knowing what to do with a Marx who cannot be shoehorned into the straightforward dichotomy between philosopher and sophist, between science and non-science: ‘Marx is anything but a sophist, although this does not mean that he is a philosopher’ ^{18/}.

‘Anything but...’? With Badiou, this reinforced negation has the character of a compliment. But what is this ‘anything’? Neither philosopher nor sophist? In the case of Marx, Plato’s foundational dichotomy ceases to be valid. Can one be a philosopher incidentally, slightly, extremely, passionately; in other words, can one have an incidental and occasional relationship to truth? And if Marx is only a philosopher ‘secondarily’, yet in no way a sophist, then what is he ‘principally’? What is this disconcerting mode of thinking and act-

ing whereby Marx circumvents the binary alternative between sophist and philosopher?

Instead of confronting these questions, which follow logically from his own assessment, Badiou evades them by pulling out his trump card: that of the double aspect. Following the example of Marx the man, who was both scientist and militant, it seems that Marx's work has a double aspect: on one hand, 'a theory of history, of the economy and of the State, conforming to the ideal of science'; on the other, 'the founding of a historical mode of politics', the 'classist' model, whose charter is provided by *The Communist Manifesto*. Between the two, philosophy occupies a 'position by induction'. And this is all we are told ¹⁹!

It would seem that, despite his declaration that henceforth it would no longer be enough merely to interpret the world, despite everything and even despite himself, Marx basically remained a philosopher by default and by remission. Badiou does not examine this way of doing science, one so at odds with the 'dominant positivist suture' of the time, that Marx stubbornly persists in calling 'critique'. The latter strives to think in a manner worthy of its object, which is to say, in a manner

worthy of capital. Yet something new takes shape here, in the way in which thought, without submitting to the vicissitudes of politics, bears a relation of conflictual indivisibility to politics while continuously interrogating its practice.

What then of Marx? Is he everything other than a sophist? Certainly, when one sees him ridiculing the mirages of public opinion in the name of 'German science'. Or everything, including a sophist? Certainly, when one sees him excoriating Proudhon's 'scientific excommunications' and doctrinaire utopias. For like Freudian Witz, critique is mocking and ironic. It opposes its great burst of irreverent red laughter to the yellow laughter of the priest.

In Badiou, fidelity to an event without a history and a politics without content has a tendency to turn into an axiomatics of resistance. Rimbaud's logical revolt, the logical resistance of Cavallès or Lautman, figure here as instances of a commitment that evades all calculation and that is supposed to provide a paradoxical resolution for the absence of relation between truth and knowledge. For the axiom is more absolute than any definition. Beyond every proof or refutation, the axiom, in sover-

eign fashion, engenders its own objects as pure effects.

Emerging out of nothing, the sovereign subject, like eventual truth, provides its own norm. It is represented only by itself. Whence the worrying refusal of relations and alliances, of confrontations and contradictions. Badiou invariably prefers an absolute configuration over one that is relative: the absolute sovereignty of truth and the subject, which begins, in desolate solitude, where the turmoil of public opinion ends. Hallward rightly sees in this philosophy of politics an 'absolutist logic' that leaves little space for multiple subjectivities, shuns the democratic experience, and condemns the sophist to a sort of exile ²⁰! Badiou's quasi-absolutist orientation preserves the ghost of a subject without object. This is a return to a philosophy of majestic sovereignty, whose decision seems to be founded upon a nothing that commands the whole.

2004

Published as a chapter of *Thing Again, Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, edited by Peter Hallward, ed Continuum, Londres/New York 2004.

¹⁹ Except for the following: "The true content of Marx's conception of the end of philosophy is in fact the thesis of the end of the State, hence an ideologico-political thesis, the thesis of communism. It is not the idea of an end of philosophy that identifies the sophist. What identifies him is his position with regard to the link between language and truth. Granted, by announcing the realization of philosophy in revolution, its dissolution into a real praxis, Marx certainly sutures philosophy to politics. Ultimately, this suture brings about a sort of exhaustion of philosophy. But this suture should not be confused with the sophist's demoralizing arrogance' (ibid.).

²⁰ Hallward, *Subject to Truth*, 284-291.