

Why Badiou is a Rousseauist

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The following is an extract from Simon Critchley's *The Faith of the Faithless* published by Verso in February 2012. We are grateful to Professor Critchley and to Verso for permission to publish it here, in conversation with our other pieces.
- The Editors

In the *Republic*, Socrates wanders out of Athens with Plato's brothers and walks down to the port of Piraeus, leaving the city behind them. After quickly demolishing the prevailing views of justice in Athenian society, Socrates starts dreaming of another city in dialogue, a just city governed by philosophers whose souls would be orientated towards the Good. This is why the standard objection to Plato—that the ideal of the philosophical city is unrealistic, utopian, or impossible to realize—is so fatuous. Of course the philosophers' city is utopian. That's the point. Indeed, one might go further and claim that it is part of the duty of philosophy to construct concepts that allow us to imagine that another city and another world are possible, however difficult that may be to achieve in practice. As Oscar Wilde famously writes in "The Soul of Man under Socialism": "A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing."¹

In the face of the avowed anti-Platonism of philosophy since the so-called linguistic turn, especially in its Heideggerian version, Alain Badiou proposes a gesture that he calls Platonic, which allows philosophy to return to what he sees as its constitutive triad of concepts in the modern epoch: being, truth, and the subject.² It is essential to keep this Platonism in mind when considering Badiou's political thinking.

¹ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Writings* (Penguin, London, 1954): 34 (hereafter abbreviated as DP).

² Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. N. Madarasz (State University of New York Press, Albany, 1999): 108.

The source of Badiou's considerable appeal lies in the understanding of philosophy that he defends. He writes that "philosophy is something that helps to change existence."³ Philosophy, for Badiou, is neither technical and largely irrelevant logic-chopping, nor is it deconstructive, melancholic poeticizing—what Badiou calls "the delights of the margin."⁴ On the contrary, philosophy is an affirmative, constructive discipline of thought. As Saint Paul writes in First Corinthians Badiou is concerned with the things that are not, in order "to bring to nothing things that are" (1 Cor. 1:27–8). Philosophy is the construction of the formal possibility of something that would break with the "febrile sterility" of the contemporary world.⁵ This is what he calls an *event* and the only question of politics, for Badiou, is whether there is something that might be worthy of the name *event*. If philosophy, with Plato, is understood as a "seizure by thought of what breaks the sleep of thought," then politics is a revolutionary seizure of power which breaks with the dreamless sleep of an unjust and violently unequal world.⁶ As such, Badiou is not concerned with the banal reality of existing politics, which he tends to dismiss rather lightly as "the democratic fetish," but with moments of rare and evanescent political invention and creativity. Like Socrates, Badiou dreams of another city in speech and therefore to accuse him of being unrealistic is to refuse to undertake the experiment in thought that his philosophy represents.

Badiou's political writings are marked by a cool rationalism and a biting satire. In addition to withering critiques and witty demolitions of the so-called war on terror, the invasion of Iraq, the bombardment of Serbia, and the pantomime of parliamentary democracy, there is a delightfully Swiftian satire on the Islamic headscarf or *foulard* affair ("Today's republic: down with hats!"⁷) and a savage and poignant denunciation of the racism that led to riots in the Parisian *banlieues* late in 2005 and later in 2007, "We have the riots we deserve."⁸ Badiou sees France as a politically "sick" and "disproportionately abject country," whose political reality is not located in the endlessly invoked republican ideal of the revolution, but in the reaction against it.⁹ For Badiou, France is the country of Thiers' massacre of the Communards, Petain's collaboration with the Nazis, and de Gaulle's colonial wars. As such, the presidential victory of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007 is an affirmation of Petainism and Le Penism and a continuation of the long war against the enemy within. Behind what Badiou sees as the transcendental

³ Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. S. Corcoran (Verso, London and New York, 2006): 9 (hereafter abbreviated as BP).

⁴ BP 35.

⁵ BP 21.

⁶ BP 10.

⁷ BP 99.

⁸ BP 114.

⁹ BP 85.

illusion of French politics, its avowed tradition of revolution and republicanism, lies its true reactionary kernel.¹⁰

As for what Badiou imagines as an alternative to the febrile sterility of the world and its increasingly orgiastic celebrations of social inequality, he describes it as an “Enlightenment, whose elements we are slowly assembling.”¹¹ Such an Enlightenment can neither be understood as what Badiou calls “state democracy,” i.e., parliamentarianism, nor “state bureaucracy,” the socialist party-state. Political struggle is “A tooth and nail fight to organize a united popular force.”¹² This requires “discipline”—an oft-repeated word in Badiou’s work. It is important to emphasize that this is not party discipline in the old Leninist sense. Rather, what is at issue here is the invention of a politics without a party at a distance from the state, a local politics that is concerned with the construction of a collectivity or group on the basis of an appeal to generality.

But what might this mean? In order to understand Badiou’s idea of politics, I think it is necessary to consider his close proximity to Rousseau, another sometime Platonist. In my view, Badiou’s understanding of politics is much more Rousseauian than Marxist. Let me list seven reasons in support of this claim.

(i) *Formalism*—In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau, like Badiou, is trying to establish the *formal* conditions of a legitimate politics. The more Marxist or sociological question of the material conditions for such a politics is continually elided. Although every event requires what Badiou calls “an evental site” (the latter is something that belongs to the situation, but what belongs to it—i.e., the event—does *not* belong to the situation¹³), this is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for an event.

(ii) *Voluntarism*—In Badiou’s view, Rousseau establishes the modern concept of politics, which is based in the “act by which a people is a people.”¹⁴ For Badiou, the key to Rousseau’s idea of popular sovereignty consists in the act of collective and unanimous declaration through which a people wills itself into existence. This act is an event understood as a collective subjective act of creation, whose radicality consists in the fact that it does not originate in any structure supported within “being” or the

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. D. Fernbach (Verso, London and New York, 2008).

¹¹ BP 56.

¹² BP 57.

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. O. Feltham (Continuum, London and New York, 2005): 175 (hereafter abbreviated as B).

¹⁴ B 344.

“situation,” such as the socio-economic realm or the dialectic of relations and forces of production in Marx. The event of politics is the making of something out of nothing through the act of the subject. Badiou is a political voluntarist.

(iii) *Equality*—Rousseau is the great thinker of what Badiou calls the “generic,” which is a key concept in Badiou’s system.¹⁵ The generic is that which is indiscernible in any situation and effects a rupture with the latter. Thought politically, the generic is that collective act or “forcing,” as Badiou puts it, whereby a group breaks with the situation by punching a hole in it.¹⁶ Political action is a generic procedure which is conducted with reference not to a relative or particular maxim of action, but to a universal norm: equality. For Badiou, true politics has to be based on the rigorous equality of all persons and be addressed to all. The means for the creation of a generic, egalitarian politics is the general will, conceived as that political subject whose act of unanimity binds a collectivity together. As Badiou writes, politics is “about finding new sites for the general will.”¹⁷

(iv) *Locality*—From this follows a fourth important point of contact with Rousseau. Although Rousseau defends—or more accurately *invents*—a generic politics understood as the act by which a people declares itself a people of equals and addresses itself to all, this can only be realized in a local manner. Badiou insists that true politics has to be intensely local and he is opposed to both delocalized capitalist globalization and its inverse in the so-called anti-globalization movement. But the fact that all politics is local does not mean that it is particular. On the contrary, Badiou, like Rousseau, argues for what we might call a local or situated universalism.

(v) *Rarity*—The issue then becomes one of identifying a locale for politics. As we have seen, Rousseau struggled to find examples of legitimate politics. He pinned his hopes on Geneva, until they started burning his books after the publication of *The Social Contract* in 1762. He held out hopes for Corsica and Poland, both of which ended in failure. If true politics is the act by which a people wills itself into existence as a radical and local break with what existed beforehand, then such a politics is rare. When Badiou responded to an earlier version of this argument, this was his criticism of Rousseau. Namely, that Rousseau’s conception of politics is too abstract and lacks an eventual site.¹⁸ But the question of

¹⁵ B 346-54.

¹⁶ B 340.

¹⁷ BP 197.

¹⁸ This was on the occasion of a conference on Badiou’s work at Cardozo Law School, New York, in November 2008. The proceedings were published as “Law and Event,” *Cardozo Law Review*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2008). See also Badiou’s excellent

abstraction might be returned to Badiou, since the only real example of politics he gives is the Paris Commune, as we will see presently. True politics is always some *mimesis* of the Commune.

(vi) *Representation*—Badiou’s reflections on the French elections of 2002 and Sarkozy’s victory in 2007 culminate in a rehearsal of Rousseau’s arguments against representative, electoral government and majority rule in *The Social Contract*. For Rousseau and Badiou, the general or generic will cannot be represented, certainly not by any form of government. Politics, then, is not about governmental representation through the mechanism of the vote, but about the presentation of a people to itself. Badiou writes, “The essence of politics, according to Rousseau, affirms presentation over and against representation.”¹⁹ The general will cannot, of course, be represented. This leads Rousseau to follow Plato in his critique of theatrical representation or *mimesis* and to argue instead for public festivals where the people would be the actors in their own political drama. As we saw above, what takes place in the public festival is the presence to itself of the people in the process of its enactment.

(vii) *Dictatorship*—However, Badiou goes a step further with Rousseau, a step that we saw the latter take above and which Carl Schmitt will take in a more dramatic fashion, as we will see below. It is a step that I refuse to take. Not only does Badiou defend popular sovereignty, which is as controversial as apple pie in the modern era—just so long as no one puts it into practice, that is—he goes on to defend Rousseau’s argument for dictatorship. This, we recall, is argued on the basis of Roman history: dictatorship is legitimate when there is a threat to the life of the body politic, and in such moments of crisis the laws which issue from the sovereign authority of the people can be suspended in the act of *iustitium*. Badiou’s claim, however, is slightly different. “Dictatorship,” he writes, “is the natural form of organization of political will.”²⁰ The form of dictatorship that Badiou has in mind is not tyranny, but what he calls “citizenry discipline.”²¹ In other words, Badiou is defending what Marx, Lenin, and Mao called “the dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The deeply Rousseauian character of Badiou’s approach to politics becomes clear in two extended lectures that he gave in 2002–3 on the Paris Commune and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In order to grasp Badiou’s argument, it is essential to understand its precise periodization. What interests

response to my argument in *Infinitely Demanding*, “On Simon Critchley’s *Infinitely Demanding*: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance,” *Critical Horizons*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2009): 154-62.

¹⁹ BP 95.

²⁰ BP 95.

²¹ BP 96.

Badiou in the Paris Commune is “the exceptional intensity of its sudden appearing.”²² Everything turns here on the moment on March 18, 1871 when a group of Parisian workers who belonged to the National Guard refused to turn over their weapons to the government of Versailles. It is this moment of armed resistance and the subsequent election of the Commune government on March 26 that constitute a political event for Badiou. Politics is the making of something out of nothing through the act of a collective subject, what he calls in many places in his recent work the “existence of an in-existent.”²³

It is this moment that is repeated—and very self-consciously repeated—in the Shanghai Commune of February 1967. This followed upon the intense power struggles within the Chinese Communist Party and Mao’s mobilization of the Red Guards against what he saw as the “revisionism” and bureaucratism of the regime. Although Badiou is very well aware that Mao ordered the dissolution of the Shanghai Commune and its replacement with a Revolutionary Committee controlled by the Party, it is this brief moment of the self-authorizing dictatorship of the proletariat that fascinates him.²⁴

What takes place in the 1871 Paris Commune is a moment of collective political self-determination. But, crucially, Badiou’s understanding of the Commune is freed from Lenin’s hugely influential critique in *State and Revolution*, where its alleged failure is used to justify the Bolshevik seizure of state power in 1917.²⁵ The same political logic is at work in the Shanghai Commune where, after having attempted to mobilize the masses politically, Mao criticizes the Commune for “extreme anarchism” and being “most reactionary.”²⁶ Badiou is acutely aware that the Cultural Revolution led to widespread barbarism, persecution, and disaster.

So, what is politics, then? It is what Badiou calls an “evanescent event,” the act by which a people declares itself into existence and seeks to follow through on that declaration.²⁷ We might say that politics is the commune and *only* the commune. Badiou writes, Platonically, “I believe this other world resides for us in the Commune.”²⁸ It is this sudden *ex nihilo* transformation of the febrile sterility of the world into a fecund something, this moment of radical rupture, that obsesses Badiou, a seizure by thought in the event that is a seizure of power. Furthermore, this event doesn’t last. After 72 days, the

²² BP 284.

²³ BP 286.

²⁴ BP 291-328.

²⁵ See V. I. Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, trans. R. Service (Penguin, London, 1992): 33-51.

²⁶ BP 307.

²⁷ BP 287.

²⁸ BP 289.

Paris Commune was crushed by the military forces of the future first President of the Third Republic, Adolphe Thiers. An estimated 20,000 Parisians were slaughtered.

It is this brief moment of politics without party and state that was repeated in a slightly different register in Paris in May 1968.²⁹ Understood biographically, the category of the event is Badiou's attempt to make sense of the experience of novelty and rupture that accompanied the "events" of '68. The general questions that drive Badiou's project are simple: What is novelty? What is creation? How does newness come into the world? Understood politically, the event is that moment of novel, brief, local, communal rupture that breaks with a general situation of social injustice and inequality through its enactment of equality. Yet if the event is evanescent, then *fidelity* is the subjective perseverance that persists in looking at the situation from the standpoint of the event, and *truth* is what fidelity constructs in a situation. Badiou's thinking is not at all some blind submission to what is perceived as the event. It is rather the process of subjective fidelity that is only retrospectively named as an event through what Badiou calls an "intervention."³⁰ Such an intervention brings about something new in the situation in which we find ourselves, and it is this order of generic novelty that Badiou captures with his notion of truth. Truth is not the veridicality of empirical statements or the coherence of logical propositions; it is the order of invention in which something radically new comes to rupture the situation.

Compelling as I find Badiou's understanding of politics, it is his taste for dictatorship that I find distasteful. Despite the protestations of Hannah Arendt in *On Revolution*, I agree that the problem of politics is the formation of the general or generic will, of a popular front or what Sartre called "the fused group."³¹ But such a position need not lead to an apology for dictatorship. In *Being and Event*, Badiou powerfully argues that if the error of Marxist politics was the attempt to occupy the terrain of the state, then true politics should operate at a distance from the state.³² But if that is the case, then why doesn't Badiou at least consider embracing the anarchist politics that he so steadfastly rejects, a politics that is also without party and at a distance from the state? Is there not a willful inconsistency between, on the one hand, Badiou's declaration that "all emancipatory politics must put an end to the model of the party...in order to affirm a politics 'without party'," and, on the other hand, his assertion that we must not lapse into "the figure of anarchism, which has never been anything else than the vain

²⁹ BP 292.

³⁰ B 201-11.

³¹ H. Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 76 et passim; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Vol. 1, trans. A Sheridan-Smith (Verso, London and New York, 2004 [new edition]): 345-51.

³² B 110-11.

critique, or the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties.”³³ Why is the black flag simply the shadow of the red flag? Might not matters be exactly the opposite?

For all the apparent optimism and robust affirmativeness of Badiou’s conception of philosophy, one might suspect that there is something deeply pessimistic at its heart, which again links Badiou to Rousseau. The formal conditions that define a true politics are so stringent and the examples given are so limited, that it is tempting to conclude that following the Paris and Shanghai Communes and after 1968 any politics of the event has become impossible, or at least extremely unlikely. Politics is like history in Heidegger: it seldom occurs. But such a conclusion forgets where this discussion of Badiou started: with Socrates wandering out of the unjust city to dream of another city in speech. Rousseau concludes his *Second Discourse* by showing that the development of social inequality culminates in a state of war between persons, tribes, nations, and civilizations. It is difficult to disagree with such a diagnosis at the present time. In the face of such a state of war, the philosopher’s dream of another city will always appear unrealistic and hopelessly utopian. To that extent, perhaps the impossibility of Badiou’s politics is its greatest strength.

³³ BP 321.