

Alain Badiou's Theory of Revolutionary Change

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Alain Badiou

Alain Badiou has developed a philosophy inspired primarily by his political activism, by Marxism and Leninism; a project over forty years, which, by his own admission, is materialist, dialectical and entirely at odds with the main thrust of continental thought since the 1970s. His ideas deserve to be taken more seriously for their revolutionary content and impact.

In a recent article published in *New Left Review* he situates his ideas within post-war French thought¹. Badiou argues that French philosophy came to terms with modernity by modernizing itself through a radical re-invention, on a quest for new ways for developing and expressing spec-

ulative thought. Since the 1960s, two things happened in philosophy: on the one hand, its working language was transformed; on the other, a conceptual battle *against* the political subject was fought, by attacking the very foundation of human agency (including political action, of course). Against this trend, the only philosopher seeking a new relation between the concept and action, especially collective action, was Alain Badiou². This is how he sums up his work: "I think that a large part of my philosophy is an attempt fully to come to terms, including from my own experience, with what happened then [1968-1975], while at the same time explaining the reasons for remaining loyal to those events;" adding: "the complete elucidation of what took place there, together with the invention of ways of remaining loyal to those events, is the real task of contemporary thinking"³.

Conferences such as Badiou's *The Communist Hypothesis* (2009) or books like Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (2003) or *Why Marx Was Right* (2011) are symptomatic of a shift: nowadays, we are emerging from a long spell in which we had to defend what was once so obvious: the very foundation of ideas, call them guiding principles, or the argument for revolution in Marx's emancipatory ideas⁴. Alex Callinicos's *The Resources of Critique*, a survey written in the wake of the anti-capitalist protests since 1999, is a search for "transcendence" (Hegel's *aufheben*) and a workable ontology (that is, a system or foundation of general concepts

¹Badiou, The Adventure of French Philosophy *New Left Review*, 35 (2005), pp. 67-77.

²Badiou, The Adventure of French Philosophy, p. 71.

³Badiou, "Can Change Be Thought?", in Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* 2011, p. 290.

⁴Eagleton, *After Theory* 2004 and Eagleton, *Why Marx Was Right* 2011

on which you can build and with which you can justify your proposals for emancipatory change)⁵. I can see why, ultimately, Callinicos finds Roy Bhaskar's "critical realist" ontology satisfactory, but not Badiou's. Indeed, there are many useful aspects in Bhaskar's theory based on the philosophy of science and drawing heavily on Marxist concepts, both elements in common with Badiou's⁶. But it so happens that, unlike Bhaskar, Badiou has never combined emancipation with religious or "new age" ideas⁷. The problem lies in interpretations which tend to attribute "angelical and near-mystical features to the philosophy of Badiou" and hinge on establishing a "dogmatic" opposition between history and event, as a prelude to arguing for a more dialectical relation between the two; the underlying thrust is ultimately to dismiss this philosophy as dualist⁸.

Whereas, in addition to Bosteels and Badiou's other translators, Eagleton was also quick to see the impact of Badiou's work on mainstream ideas about human

agency (and consequently political action) and on a broader scale, on contemporary philosophy (and its agendas) as a whole⁹. Stathis Kouvelakis has also valued Badiou's politics as the art of the impossible (in the sense of what sounds and seems impossible, but can, nevertheless be recognised and followed through when it happens):

Marx's revolutionary political position is not the fruit of a free choice among several 'positive' possibilities, for it proceeds, literally, from an impossibility: it is the production of a new possibility. Rather, it surges up out of a contradiction and a struggle that divide even individuals from themselves [] confronting them with possibilities that pre-existed their consciousness; this is so even if the typical task of revolutionary politics consists precisely

⁵Callinicos, *The Resources of Critique* 2006, p. 5.

⁶There are many promising ideas in Bhaskar, for whom Marx's political writings exemplify critical realism which he considers Marx's unwritten methodology. See Bhaskar, *Philosophy and the Idea of Freedom* 1991, p. 143. For *The Possibility of Naturalism*, the social objects which social science studies include beliefs about these objects and consequently an explanatory critique is needed to judge value and truth and decide ensuing action. You can see right there the need for an ontology to discuss values in terms of truth as an objective entity. (Bhaskar, *The Possibility of Naturalism* 1989. Bhaskar's theory of social being and human nature as being "four-planar" is helpful. We engage in four levels of relations with the world around us: the plane of material transactions with nature; the plane of inter-subjective or personal relations; the plane of social relations and the plane of the subjectivity of the agent. Social life consists in these four planes of interaction which are dialectically interdependent. See Roy Bhaskar and Alan Norrie, *Dialectic and Dialectical Critical Realism* 1998, pp. 561-574.

⁷Bensad, "Alain Badiou and the Miracle of The Event", in Hallward (ed.), *Think Again*, pp. 94-105. For a detailed rebuttal of Bensad's polemical and not so well-informed argument including Bensad's wild accusations of unsettled accounts with Stalinism, see Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, pp. 146-147.

⁸Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, p. 147. But read the whole chapter ("One Divides Into Two", *ibid.*, pp. 110-156), for a thorough account of Badiou's Maoism. Badiou has never advocated a complete break with the past, nor ignored history (except as uninterrupted sequence) as in the mystical break the late Bensad accuses him of. Badiou describes this dualist idea of an absolute beginning as "speculative leftism". See Alain Badiou, Meditation 20, *Being and Event*, p. 210 and the relevant chapter in Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, pp. 273-288.

⁹ Eagleton, *Figures of Dissent. Critical Essays on Fish, Spivak, iek and Others* 2003, p. 249. For Eagleton: "this is a timely assault on the post-structuralist fetishism of "subject positions", that genetic fallacy or epistemological reductionism which would judge the truth-content of a proposition wholly in the light of its enunciator - a habit common to both structuralists and the upper classes."

in re-elaborating these possibilities by playing on their internal contradictions in order to generate new possibilities.¹⁰

Marxism and Badiou

I argue that despite several attempts at squeezing Badiou into a tight-fitting dualist (utopian) or post-marxist box, his philosophy actually belongs squarely to contemporary Marxist debate, challenging contemporary (reformist or so-called radical democratic) political theory; because its premises is the rejection of any idea of democracy within a capitalist framework. Badiou has also engaged systematically with the main opponents of any theory advocating or justifying revolutionary action and human emancipation and equality. Bear in mind that mainstream political philosophy gave up on change long ago; at least since the post-Marxist *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), which relied on French postmodern philosophy to separate Gramsci from Lenin¹¹. Badiou gave a paper on Lenin and dialectical thought at a conference organised by Sebastian Budgen, Stathis Kouvelakis and Slavoj iek, “Towards a Politics of Truth: The Retrieval of Lenin” (2001)¹². More recently, he also instigated and co-organised the conference *The Communist Hypothesis* (2009). The same year, he published writings on communism in which he states unambiguously that a total break with parliamentary capitalism is the way forward, distancing himself from any radical democratic “antagonism” or “agonism” of the

post-marxists, including Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, but also Jacques Rancière (whose vague version of antagonism is “dissensus” to differentiate it from consensus), or even Slavoj iek himself whose psychoanalytical influence by Lacan prevents him from bridging the gap between theory and action¹³.

Badiou’s book *The Communist Hypothesis* (2010) makes no bones about his allegiances. What is needed is a different kind of politics¹⁴. We have to oppose the world as it is with “a general hypothesis” and recover the passion of ideas; since the cause of emancipatory humanity has not lost its power; the greatest enemy of a politics of emancipation is not state repression, but nihilism. *The Communist Hypothesis* presents us with the paradox of materialist idealism; and “fidelity” (in Badiou’s terminology) or “commitment” (in Sartre’s), following the revolutionary event in politics (the 1871 Commune, October 1917, Paris 1968). In the face of commemorations which deny its true import or commemorate its safe distance from the present, Badiou draws inspiration from ‘68 - not really for its cultural rebellion against establishment values (soon absorbed by society to be commodified), but for witnessing the dynamic of a “political subject” coming into being. *Theory of the Subject* (1982) was the first attempt at making sense of this. And even now the consequences of ‘68: what can still be learned from that experience is primarily what still interests Badiou: that that which is impossible, is, in fact, possible, a total reversal of ideas and behaviour, through new ways of

¹⁰Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, 2003, p. 278.

¹¹ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* 1984; Laclau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* 1985.

¹² “Towards a Politics of Truth: The Retrieval of Lenin”, Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut, Essen, Germany, February 2001. Budgen, Kouvelakis and iek (eds), *Lenin Reloaded* 2005.

¹³Badiou, “De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle?”, p. 82.

¹⁴Badiou, “De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle?”, p. 81.

¹⁵Badiou, “Mai 68 revisté, quarante ans après”, pp. 39-57.

doing politics and thinking the political¹⁵.

To summarise, we are contemporaries of '68; despite all the intervening social changes, we have the same problem of creating new forms of organisation adequate to a contemporary response to political antagonisms. It is vital to retain a hypothesis rooted in history (in time and space, so not exclusively abstract) of a world freed from the law of profit and private interest, in the face of mainstream intellectual constructions that claim that this is impossible because the law of the world dictates that there can be no politics of emancipation. For Badiou, what is at stake is to go beyond the traditional form of political organisation, but how? Would it work? His "communist hypothesis" is an affirmation requiring militant courage to defend and practise our idea of emancipation. Faced with today's imperative to live without ideas, after a long period of resignation in which people have grown to believe that it is inevitable that one should live only for self-interest, Badiou objects that you cannot live without the idea of communism. "The real of politics begins with the conviction of living with the idea"¹⁶. It is significant within a changing political climate that, whereas in *Polemics* (2003) Badiou thought that the project of an International did not make sense, by 2009, he had changed his mind: "only today that the conditions are assembled for a Communist International that is neither state-controlled nor bureaucratic"¹⁷.

Badiou's Relevance

There are two things that make Badiou's intervention in post-war thought exceptional.

First, a systematic attack on all the

main currents of contemporary thought inspired chiefly by Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger (and derivatives: Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy) as well as Gilles Deleuze; which Badiou calls "anti-philosophy", "philosophy of finitude" and "contemporary sophistry", to describe the negative consequences of these strands of thinking. Badiou's arguments are put forward in books dealing with specific thinkers, the ground-breaking *Being and Event* (1988) which can be read as a rejection of Heidegger's being-for-death ontology challenged by Badiou's alternative: being for action or putting forward a philosophy of the revolutionary event; also *Deleuze or the Clamor of Being* (2000) which attacks the foundation of Deleuze's thought, and also *Anti-Wittgenstein* (2009); targeting Wittgenstein's trivialization or debasement of thinking and *Theory of the Subject* (1982), an earlier book which came out of a direct involvement in 1968 and its aftermath, in which Badiou develops his own theory of a political subject, the outcome of active militancy, entirely in opposition to mainstream contemporary thought.

Secondly, Badiou's presents us with a development of Marxian thought which dares to confront the postmodern or neo-Kantian hegemony with a philosophical conception of revolutionary change. Badiou situates the dynamic of change and human agency as the kernel of thinking. With *Being and Event* in mind, an authoritative monograph on his work states that: "Badiou's project is one of the most remarkable, most original, and most powerful contemporary efforts to renew an engaged, progressive conception of philosophy"¹⁸

¹⁶Badiou, "Mai 68 revisté, quarante ans après", pp.57

¹⁷Badiou, *Polemics* 2006, p. 60 and *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* 2011, p. 122.

¹⁸Hallward, *Badiou, A Subject to Truth*, p. 322.

Being and Event is about how new knowledge comes about. The book tackles the concept of the new, its coming into being, how you define it, using set theory to break out of limited thinking, by considering mathematical infinity and its infinite multiplicity (Badiou refers to it as inconsistent multiplicity because it does not form a whole; since there is no set of sets), and relates infinity to potentiality. He does this by theorising situations as sets of different kinds and concentrating on that which is exceptional because it exceeds them; thus breaking patterns of endless repetition; the same matrix of thought can then be applied to patterns determined by the outlooks of existing knowledges¹⁹. On Badiou's account, the philosophy of the event collapses the opposition concept-existence in order to demonstrate that the concept is a living thing, involving creation, a process, an event, and not something divorced from existence; he overturns Kant's idealist philosophy of a total division between the philosophy of knowledge and the philosophy of action (Kant's separation between theoretical and practical reason), demonstrating instead that knowledge itself, even scientific knowledge, is actually a practice and inventing the philosophy of militancy²⁰. (This far cry from abstraction owes everything to Marxist *praxis* and Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.")²¹.

It is in Meditation 9 of *Being and Event* that abstract theory is discussed in relation to historical situations, trans-

ferring the notions of inclusion and belonging across from axiomatic set theory to socio-political situations. Whilst every multiple/everyone in the set/situation is *included* within it, belonging within the set/situation is quite different. You can be included, but not belong, thus being effectively excluded²². In Meditation 16 Badiou considers the dynamic of the abstract event in relation to the "topology of action", later at the centre of *Logics of Worlds* (2008) in which he locates, quantifies and tracks change in its becoming or, in Badiou's language, its "appearing"²³. *Logics of Worlds* is still concerned with truth-events, but specifically with "the material process of their appearing", as Badiou puts it in his *Second Manifesto for Philosophy* (2010) or in respect of its consequences²⁴. In *Polemics*, Badiou explains this shift: "An ontology seeks to understand the status quo, the state of the situation including the "long-term stability of oppressive regimes and that which cuts into them, that which leads to the possibility of different forms of practice and thought", whereas the sequel considers "the significance reach of local experiences, of that which appears in the world as a new instance of the universal". This programme may seem abstract, but it is by situating anew the correlation between being, or appearing, and 'that which comes', that philosophy can accomplish its task of welcoming, and of mentally facilitating, the operations of politics²⁵.

In *Logics of Worlds*, Badiou says that a political "evental sequence" (a dynamic following on from an event, or its effects)

¹⁹Chapter-by-chapter commentary in Norris's *Badiou's Being and Event*, 2009. Also, Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 1999. Straightforward explanation in Badiou, *Ethics*, 2001.

²⁰Badiou, "The Adventure of French Philosophy", p. 76.

²¹Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach", p. 617.

²²Badiou, Meditation 9, *Being and Event*, p. 104-111.

²³Badiou, Meditation 16, *Being and Event*, p. 176-177.

²⁴Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 126.

²⁵Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 61.

always involves a body which is subjectivized by the event. It “always takes the form of an organization”²⁶. The trace of the political event is the emergence in a specific (philosophical and empirical) world of the new organised collective entity or subject²⁷. To detect a trace of a change at its most extreme (what he calls an event), though, is not enough. The new calls for an anthropological change in the people who have witnessed it, through a process of “incorporation” “in terms of consequences”. In other words, to follow up on the consequences of the sea change requires of individuals that they become an active element of this collective entity he calls “the body”, both the physical body and the collective body faithful to the entirely new breakthrough which has been witnessed; this is “a becoming one with the present”, as a faithful subject in a political sequence inaugurated by the event²⁸.

This kind of “body” is a political entity that forms after the breakthrough, as its consequence. Its construction “subjects individuals to previously unknown forms of disciplineparty cohesion.”²⁹ Think of this change in terms of commitment, an anthropological change in behaviour and availability to a political project which sees the shift “from the figure of the individual to that of the subject.in which one’s life is raised up and accomplished by having participated in this way in something beyond their simple subsistence.”³⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre was Badiou’s first influence. Sartre’s concept of “group in fusion” also considers the dynamic from individual inertia to the identification with a purpose of an organised group which through its

formation negates or challenges the rest of the social field as soon as it comes into existence, as a level of organisation. For Sartre, what causes a collective to restructure itself and function as a group is “a complex event”³¹. This is something impossible in normal circumstances, but becomes possible and even a reality at certain times.

Badiou’s theory of the encounter with the event envisages a process which involves a choice forced upon us between “incorporation” (joining the consequences of the event, allowing the change to dictate what we do and how we now identify ourselves in the light of the event) indifference, this speaks for itself, or hostility to it (for example, Andr Glucksmann, the ex-Maoist turned “new philosopher”, reacting against the political evental sequence of May 1968, by spear-heading a rejection in France of all it stood for)³².

Bruno Bosteels argues convincingly that all the attention over *Being and Event* is overshadowing Badiou’s *Theory of The Subject* which is just as relevant today. In some ways, although *Being and Event* was written later, it would be more logical for it to be the first in the sequence, then the ontology in which to place a new subject emerging from an entirely new situation would precede the discussion of the subject itself. The French editions of the two books both appeared in the 1980s. By the time *Theory of The Subject* was translated in 2009, Badiou’s English reception, which only took into account *Being and Event*, had already taken place. Furthermore, it is often the case in the reception of ideas in terms of their understanding in a dif-

²⁶Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 72.

²⁷Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 569.

²⁸Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 508.

²⁹Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 110.

³⁰Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 109.

³¹Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, p. 345-404; p. 346, 349.

³²Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 110.

ferent cultural context that they may be transformed or misunderstood completely. Finally, although *Theory of The Subject* was written thirty years ago, the fact remains that its publication in English does change the agenda of *today's* political theory, growing in relevance now for many reasons, including the need for such theorising, thus “presupposing a new contemporaneity”, as Badiou describes such phenomena³³. The recent *Logics of Worlds* actually renews and validates Badiou’s earlier theory of the political subject, confirming many of its principles. Between the two stands the lofty *Being and Event*, first published when such matters had been discredited by philosophy for at least half a century.

One misunderstanding which puts people off reading Badiou’s work relates to its difficulty, due to his use of mathematics. Badiou explains that it was Plato who secularised philosophy from its religious and mythical origins through mathematical procedure of the dialectic; a new type of thought and an operation of thinking. From then on, until Kant, maths was always integrated in philosophy, considered a discipline of thinking and a condition of philosophy; an integral part of ontology. But since Hegel (whose interests in mathematics was limited to the concept of the infinite), maths was used only as a technique by thinkers³⁴. This perfectly justified misunderstanding obscures

what is effectively Badiou’s substantial reform of philosophical method which, in the past forty years, has relied more on poetic language and (in continental philosophy) drawn on myth-making to construct an argument rather than on logic. Badiou’s contribution is to have undercut the very foundation of mainstream “postmodern” thought³⁵. In practice, Badiou’s intervention deals with postmodernism at a deeper level than the many excellent critiques which have highlighted its contradictions, while failing to address the root of the problems postmodernism poses. I think Badiou achieves this by substituting the postmodern matrix of philosophical method in two ways: first, by attacking the confusion of thought it expresses so poetically and seductively and separating argument-driven writing from the rhetoric of poetic language and, second, by rejecting postmodernist philosophy’s reliance on problematics (another kind of maths) and chaos theory, used as a basis for arguments in favour of complexity, pluralism and difference³⁶.

Event and events placed in context

Badiou is not the only philosopher to have theorised the event. Event theory really begins with Hegel; his *The Logic of Science* claims that philosophy is a cognition

³³Badiou, *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*, p. 138.

³⁴Badiou, *Philosophy and Mathematics*, pp. 94-96.

³⁵ In this respect, Badiou positions himself within a small minority of thinkers who treat mathematics not as a model language or a matrix, but “as a singular site for thinking” Badiou, *Philosophy and Mathematics*, p. 302, footnote 1.

³⁶Gilles Deleuze explicitly discusses problematics (in both his doctoral dissertations) in *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*. “Ninth Series of the Problematic”, p. 63-68 and Deleuze, “Ideas and the Synthesis of Difference” in *Difference and Repetition*, p. 214-274; Deleuze writes: “we should speak of a dialectics of calculus rather than a metaphysics”, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 226. Mathematics in Deleuze explained by Daniel W. Smith, “Badiou and Deleuze on the Ontology of Mathematics”, in Hallward (ed.), *Think Again*, p. 77-93. (Smith acknowledges that ultimately Badiou’s theory of the event is “a philosophy of the activist subject”. p. 93, which is exactly the opposite of a philosophy of mysticism).

of what is true in events³⁷. Central to Hegel's understanding of the event is a conception of change situated historically and empirically in time³⁸. Indeed, Hegel's discussion of the event bears the French Revolution in mind³⁹. He draws the distinction between events which are observable phenomena - but no more than transient conditions - and others of universal importance. The interpretation of the event requires "reflective history", applying preconceived (*a priori*) principles to the phenomena observed⁴⁰. "This takes the occurrence out of the category of the past and makes it virtually present."⁴¹ Hegel separates events themselves from the history of events. Their history always requires a narration and an interpretation of what happened *Hegel, Philosophy of History, p. 60.* In trying to understand them, we distinguish what is essential from that which is not⁴².

Jean-Francois Lyotard finds his version of the event in Kant who, to put it simply, argues against human intervention in events, on the basis of his conviction that we are ultimately powerless. Lyotard then relates the idea of the sublime (or call it a powerless response to events) to human tragedies such as, infamously, the Holocaust which, on his account, we can only contemplate in horror as unsayable Radical

Evil (rather than as Badiou argues in his *Ethics* situate in time and place, with the help of reason, as a political sequence)⁴³. For Badiou, this postmodern idea of Evil is idealist: "it provides for our time the unique, unrivalled - and in this sense, transcendent, or unsayable - measure of Evil pure and simple."⁴⁴ Lyotard goes so far as to call the encounter with an event as: "coming face to face with nothingness"⁴⁵. Jean-Luc Nancy's event is an occurrence and a surprise which he defines as "the leap into the space-time of nothing that stems from 'beforehand' or elsewhere"⁴⁶. Jacques Derrida's event is also totally out of reach, "a promise that is impossible to keep."⁴⁷ Negri superficially adopts elements of Badiou's thinking of the event (the idea of revolutionary change) into his autonomist libertarian outlook, according to which the event becomes: "that point where the common decides upon the common" (an or-

³⁷Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, p. 588. Jean-Luc Nancy, "The Surprise of the Event", pp. 91-104, p. 91, paraphrases Hegel's passage: "Philosophy is not meant to be a narration of happenings but a cognition of what is true in them, and further, on the basis of this cognition, to comprehend that which, in the narrative, appears as a mere happening".

³⁸"The general thought - the category which first presents itself in this restless mutation of individuals and peoples, existing for a time and then vanishing - is that of change at large." Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 72.

³⁹Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p. 452.

⁴⁰Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p.4 and p.60.

⁴¹Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p.6.

⁴²Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, p.65.

⁴³Badiou, "The Problem of Evil" in *Ethics*, p. 58-89.

⁴⁴Badiou, "The Problem of Evil" in *Ethics*, p. 62.

⁴⁵"Thus, to encounter an event is like bordering on nothingness." Lyotard, *Peregrinations* 1988, p. 18.

⁴⁶Nancy, 'The Surprise of the Event', p. 102

⁴⁷Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 81.

ganised collectivity)⁴⁸. But when you look for substance, all you find is the kind of rhetoric that typifies *Empire* and *Multitude*.

Badiou and anarchism

Badiou's consistent critique of the capitalist state and of so-called parliamentary democracy is accompanied by a rejection of the party-state (Soviet style or Chinese style after the Cultural Revolution); that is, of the Stalinist party-state or the Maoist Marxist-Leninist party before 1965 and after 1968, and including the parties of the traditional or constitutional Left. This has attracted the attention of anarchists wishing to draw on his ideas in an attempt to co-opt his reservations to anarchism into post-anarchist theory⁴⁹. Saul Newman thinks that Badiou: "veers quite close towards anarchism"⁵⁰. Whereas Benjamin Noys argues that: "Badiou's work poses important questions about revolutionary change and his criticisms of anarchism allow us to sharpen what anarchist thought and practice might have to offer and what resources it might have to develop."⁵¹ Post-anarchists are attracted by statements such as this one: "We know today that all emancipatory politics must

put an end to the model of the party, or of multiple parties, in order to affirm a politics 'without party'". However, Badiou continues: "and yet at the same time *without lapsing into the figure of anarchism, which has never been anything else than the vain critique, or the double, or the shadow, of the communist parties, just as the black flag is only the double or the shadow of the red flag*"⁵². Badiou's target is the party-state⁵³. The form of political organisation he champions includes the Mexican Chiapas, Badiou's *Organisation Politique*, and the Polish dockworkers' *Solidarnosc*⁵⁴.

It is a fact that Badiou has always attacked anarchism, whether of a post-Marxist variety or associated with radical democracy, and its reformist agendas in the form of Negri's autonomism or the implicit anarchism or "neo-anarchist equality" of Badiou's former colleague Jacques Rancière which never goes beyond a critique of the status quo, the celebration of the part without a part (the people in society who are consistently discriminated against), but discounting any form of political organisation whatsoever⁵⁵. There can be no doubt that Badiou is clear about autonomism, Negri and Rancière's ambig-

⁴⁸ *Kairós, Alma Venus, Multitudo* in Negri, *Time for Revolution*, p. 248. It underpins the more accessible *Multitude*. The concept of event Negri takes from Deleuze and specifically from Deleuze's discussions about the *clinamen* and Greek atomism. But Deleuze thought that the purpose of Epicurus's atomism was only instrumental, serving to provide an alternative genealogy to the monist ontology of Parmenides and especially of Plato, in which, for Deleuze, the ontology of the Many and the Idea figure as an n-dimensional multiplicity is expressed. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, p. 182. So Negri's linking of the event to revolution is indebted to Badiou. It is in Badiou's conceptualisation of the event that the connection is made.

⁴⁹ Newman, "Anarchism, Poststructuralism and the Future of Radical Politics".

⁵⁰ Newman, "Anarchism, Poststructuralism and the Future of Radical Politics", p. 12 cited in Noys, "Through a Glass Darkly: Alain Badiou's critique of anarchism".

⁵¹ Noys, "Through a Glass Darkly".

⁵² Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 321.

⁵³ Badiou, "Beyond Formalization" in Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, p. 325.

⁵⁴ Badiou, *Polemics*, p. 292.

⁵⁵ Hallward, "Staging Equality: Rancière's Theatrocracy and the Limits of Anarchic Equality", p. 153. Hallward confirms this view.

ity⁵⁶. For Badiou, the Italian autonomists' movementism "does not constitute any really independent political space"⁵⁷. He has no time for Negri's idea that "creative power will be 'expressed' in the free unfolding of the multitudes."⁵⁸ Negri's multitude is "constituent only with regard to domination This is antidialectical politics"⁵⁹.

In a 2002 interview, Badiou makes the point that: "the mass movements have avoided any kind of discipline, whereas we know that discipline in all fields, is the key to truths", going on to say that: "it is the task of politics to construct new forms of discipline to replace the discipline of political parties, which are now saturated."⁶⁰ But surely the concept of, and anxiety about, discipline, lacking in Italian autonomism and libertarian anarchism, is precisely at the core of organisation and the party-form. Would an entirely new form of revolutionary party not be a necessary consequence of the need for discipline and directives? When Badiou speaks of the "impossibility of truly independent politics", he means impossible in the existing state of the situation, unless an entirely new development takes us by surprise, which is when impossibility becomes possible, indeed real⁶¹. Badiou's own political organisation, *L'Organisation politique* he describes as: "impossible"⁶².

The root of the problem, I would suggest, is to be found in parliamentary parties whose blatant contradictions Badiou, having always belonged to extra-

parliamentary leftwing parties, has always rejected, based on their track record, their fallacies and their hypocrisy. His reservations about party extend to recent ideas of an anti-capitalist party. Yet, Badiou has always been involved in party-form organisation and we must remember that he is one of the founders of the *Marxist-Leninist Union of Communists of France* (UCFML) someone who, in 1985, together with other militants, formed *Organisation Politique* (OP) which has intervened in factories and among immigrants in France. The question then, is how to effect radical change when this requires a high level of political organisation, coordination and communication. Can there be an organisation of politics at grass roots level, outside or in parallel to the pseudo-politics of parliamentary capitalism which survives a single issue, the anti-capitalism expressed at Genoa and Seattle or the mixed agendas of the *15 May Movement* and *Occupy*?

The changing and contradictory nature of Badiou's thought on organisation is borne out by what he says about political "directives" which express how principles "might become active in a situation" and be transformed by contact with the situation⁶³. In effect, they are the outcome of organisation and the translation of strategy into political action. For, as Badiou explains: "what happens is the constitution of the situation into a political situation by the emergence of directives. When these emerge, they also pro-

⁵⁶Two chapters in Badiou's *Metapolitics* attack Rancière's politics. See Badiou, "Rancière and the Community of Equals" and "Rancière and APolitics", p. 107-124. Rancière's failure is not to understand that every political process manifests itself "as an organised process". Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 124.

⁵⁷Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 329.

⁵⁸Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 338.

⁵⁹Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 335.

⁶⁰Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 337.

⁶¹ Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 329.

⁶²Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 329.

⁶³Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 330.

⁶⁴Badiou, "Beyond Formalization", p. 330.

vide some indication of the political capacity of the people in the situation.”⁶⁴ What follows from this statement is that Badiou’s directives cannot but assume a political intelligence, and therefore an organising intelligence. In this logic, we must ask: who would issue them? How are they arrived at? What level of organisation is needed for them to come into being? For Lenin, according to Badiou: “what is fundamental is precisely the decision, the organization, and the force of the political will. We move from a consciousness organised by history to a consciousness organised by a party.”⁶⁵ For Badiou, what is needed is to organise an entirely different kind of politics, a politics organised by an alliance among all the people willing to in-

vent it. It will have no relation with institutional and electoral party politics of the system, building on what has been learned from the experience of the past twenty years or so, given that parliamentary politics whose real name is capitalist parliamentarism, are pressed into service by the banks⁶⁶.

In conclusion, I can’t see how such questions of organisation can be avoided. Having said that, I also think that when Bosteels recommends that critics find in Badiou “an accomplice rather than an adversary”, to overcome the age-old patterns of polemicizing on the Left, when what is at stake is “the collective project of making a common front,” he has a point⁶⁷.

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⁶⁵Badiou, “Beyond Formalization”, p. 332.

⁶⁶Badiou, “De quel réel cette crise est-elle le spectacle?”, p. 81.

⁶⁷Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, p. 286.

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