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# Metapolitics





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ALAIN BADIOU

Translated and with an Introduction

by

Jason Barker



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## Translator's Introduction<sup>1</sup>

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What is politics today? asks Alain Badiou, in this his most systematic treatment of the question so far. His immediate response – that politics is certainly not ‘the political’ – recalls the terminological distinction advanced by the jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt. It was in the Germany of the early 1930s, in the context of weak parliamentary government and in the shadow of revolution, that Schmitt argued the case for a sovereign constitution in order to strengthen ‘the all-embracing political unit, the state’.<sup>2</sup> For Schmitt, one might say that politics as subjective practice was quite simply irrelevant to the structure and endurance of political authority. In *Metapolitics*, by complete contrast, Badiou sets out from the premise that the State (generally capitalised here), instead of being all-embracing or totalitarian, is in fact something akin to a representative fiction, albeit a constitutive one.

It was in 1985, in his *Peut-on penser la politique?*, that Badiou would first highlight the fiction of State sovereignty, and expose the myth of the superiority of Western liberal democracy over the totalitarian regimes of the East. The intervening years, which have seen the people of the ex-Soviet bloc paying for this ‘superiority’ through hyperinflation, unemployment, corruption and widespread ‘ethnic’ unrest, have confirmed Badiou’s point with

devastating effect. For Badiou, the administrative collapse of the Eastern European nations could hardly be put down to the superiority of a capitalist over a communist State. Indeed, if anything, this collapse would merely confirm the historical precariousness of the State as a figure of democracy. For Badiou, the security of the political is imperilled – albeit unpredictably, and at odds with every ‘democratic’ norm – by the irrepressible resistance of politics.<sup>3</sup>

However, the situation is simultaneously more negative and more positive than it first appears. More negative because today those political sequences through which oppressed peoples fight for liberation no longer occupy a rightful place or enjoy any real visibility in our post-Cold War world. Instead, liberation politics is automatically read as a sign of impending humanitarian crisis. Despite this, and counter-intuitive as it may seem, Badiou refuses to be swayed by the contemporary ‘crisis’ of politics; a ‘crisis’ which according to Marxist common sense reached its ‘high point’ in May ’68.<sup>4</sup> Why? Because on Badiou’s terms crises are no longer either terminal or cyclical. In other words, Badiou refuses the very (pseudo-dialectical) notion of crisis. Today, ‘crisis’ affects the very condition of our social existence, and has become the stock in trade of ‘legitimate’ democratic representation, such that claiming high or low points in politics, while of interest to biographers and historians, sheds no light on politics *in actu*. To be more precise, ‘crisis’, from Badiou’s standpoint, is nothing but the opaque sign of the absence or invisibility of real politics, not a systemic or epochal fact. The situation, however, is more ‘positive’ inasmuch as the putative crisis of politics, so far as Badiou is concerned, neither hinders its practices nor detracts from its core principles.

But what practices or principles can we expect from a politics that so often appears to provoke nothing but a mixture of



cynicism and disbelief from the population at large? There is arguably a profound *lack* of politics today when measured against the revolutionary mass movements of old. But why should we take this perceived deficit as the sign of a hidden capacity for political resistance? This is obviously where a little more familiarity with Badiou's philosophy is called for.

Badiou's defining work of philosophy, *L'Être et l'événement*,<sup>5</sup> which informs the present collection of essays, arguably reinvents the question of being, and thus reinvents ontology. Badiou's theoretical starting point is nothing so empirically 'self-evident' as 'the social world'. Instead, Badiou begins with ontological axioms and procedures that subtract meaning from any putatively consistent world or situation, including 'the social world'. The name 'politics' occupies a special place in this ontological framework. Rather than 'being-in-the-world' – Badiou's ontology is *not* to be confused with Heidegger's sociology of being – politics is that which radically detracts, or subtracts *itself*, from all experience of what 'the social world' actually is. Badiou is not so pessimistic as to exclude from the realm of real possibility the type of radical political transformations that characterised modernity.<sup>6</sup> By presenting politics as a singular work, a mobile capacity that constantly defies classification, Badiou is able to hold on to such a possibility.

Nonetheless it must be said that Badiou's grasp is immensely strained, since his ontology operates in the realm of 'pure multiplicity', which is to say that it presupposes, as one of its founding ontological axioms, that 'Any experience at all is the infinite deployment of infinite differences.' Those unfamiliar with the various paradigms of multiplicity<sup>7</sup> should at least recognise the pertinence of the term for the articulation of complex, 'over-determined'<sup>8</sup> sets of circumstances. A world of infinite multiplicity could also be said to affirm the *undetermined* nature of anything

and anybody; that, in Badiou's words, 'There are as many differences, say, between a Chinese peasant and a young Norwegian professional as between myself and anybody at all, including myself.'<sup>9</sup> In other words: if anything, nothing is certain.

But this 'nothing' – and this is the mainspring of Badiou's ontology – is not to be taken as an outright negation. While Badiou accepts, following Sartre, that the essential ontological fabric of being is 'void', he still maintains that the 'ideo-logical' structure of any given situation is consistent, and quite capable of producing a reality effect. For example, although the proletariat of 1848 had 'nothing to lose but their chains', what ultimately made them amount to *something*, or 'consist' in their social being, was the internationalisation of their struggle for freedom (74). Thus one responds to Leibniz's famous question in the following way: there is something rather than nothing on condition that the 'nothing' in question can be presented and 'counted as one'. Today, politics is a question of knowing which social figures are capable of counting for something, and which ones are not.<sup>10</sup>

For Badiou, then, the popular cynicism and disbelief with which politics is typically greeted is no less of a political problem today than it ever was. Moreover, nihilism, or the ultra-sceptical attitude that nothing can be done, that no political alternatives are thinkable beyond the 'laws' laid down by the global market, is perhaps only a natural consequence of the extreme rarity of 'events'.<sup>11</sup> The French Revolution of 1792, the Paris Commune of 1871, the Russian Revolution of 1917, function by way of 'political truth procedures' which aim to establish 'fidelity' to events which have at least one thing in common, one 'common denominator': namely, their resistance to any form of political representation, even and especially if such resistance puts their very political survival in question. An event can never be

guaranteed – although the suspicion that it never took place is hardly an obstacle to its veridicality. The fact that Badiou himself admits to being uncertain as to whether any event took place in 1968<sup>12</sup> by no means prevents us from *assuming* that it did, and on this basis drawing the relevant conclusions for political practice. After all, the threat of non-existence in a world of infinite nothingness, as Pascal came to realise, is to all intents and purposes futile.

But what conclusions does Badiou have in mind here? And what type of political practice is made possible from the point of such singular instances of politics?

## I Politics Unbound

Badiou's first task is to distance himself from political philosophy, opting instead for so-called 'metapolitics'. While contemporary political philosophy is renowned for its claim to neutrality and critical reflection, metapolitics makes no attempt to seek ideological immunity for itself. We encounter such fraudulent behaviour in Kant's revolutionary idealism coupled with his distaste for the 'extremists' of the French Revolution (12). Today, the mere spectacle of democracy (and few are more skilled at waxing lyrical on the benefits of liberal democracy than the contemporary armchair philosophers) lives on in the work of Richard Rorty, whose preference for 'irony' over real politics is well documented.<sup>13</sup> For Badiou, philosophers are no more immune to political decision-making than anyone else, including those civil servants masquerading as politicians whose discredited grasp of public opinion is increasingly plain for all to see. Metapolitics is the apparatus for attacking this arch-complacency. Against political philosophy, metapolitics seeks to

politicise, beyond the accepted limits of political theory, philosophical practice.

What then follows in *Metapolitics* is a series of tactical withdrawals from all forms of political representation. The inspiration here is clearly Lenin, although Badiou is at pains to qualify any such attachment. Not only has metapolitics no interest in the ways and means of parliamentary democracy, its militant thought-praxis cannot take the form of a party. The strange prospect of a 'politics without party' is accentuated in light of Badiou's hostility to communitarian alternatives (93–4), those self-sufficient minority support networks that fill in for the retreat of grand narratives from ordinary people's lives. On this basis, Badiou's present commitment to locally situated politics would seem to mark a subtle yet significant change in emphasis. His defining shift from global-systemic issues to local-situated ones has been marked, since 1985, by his active involvement in the Organisation Politique, a group of political activists committed to the struggles of immigrant workers living in France.<sup>14</sup> What political principle can a politics which supports illegal immigrant workers on the issue of residency papers, but which abandons any interest in the wider transformation of representative institutions (trade unions and universal suffrage), possibly fulfil?

Highlighting the 'dispersive flexibility' of Marx and Lenin's 'party', Badiou responds in Chapter 4 with the concept of 'political unbinding'. What political mass movements have irrevocably exposed, he suggests, through the lessons and experiences of 'May '68 and its aftermath', is the weakness of every form of social bond, whether it be party political or socioeconomic. Today the source of real politics no longer consists in recasting the bonds (by forming a more representative or democratically accountable party, or by amending the capitalist system *à la* Third Way reformers) but in their meticulous unbinding.

Despite the seemingly anarchist implications of renouncing the social bond with no specified 'ends' in mind – although of course one may remark that capitalism has never been more adept at exploiting its own 'revolutionary' potential than it is today<sup>15</sup> – Badiou's point here is that the political – as opposed to socioeconomic – 'breakdown' of community brings about the right conditions for collective intellectual work. No 'one' can determine what is objectively good for a community. The fiction of political representation, in pretending to advance the interests of others,<sup>16</sup> must therefore be swept aside in order to make way for the reality of political processes, for it is only then that a singular political sequence can begin to take shape. Political unbinding is therefore the creative act whereby subjects, in renouncing any outside interest (the so-called 'exteriority' of politics [40]), break with routine and begin to empower themselves as collectives.

We must give Badiou's radical conception of politics its proper due, particularly in light of its alleged abdication of political 'responsibility'. The charge laid by Daniel Bensaid, for example, that Badiou's lingering fidelity to Maoism explains his refusal to acknowledge the changing nature of the contemporary political landscape,<sup>17</sup> presupposes exactly the kind of positivist dichotomy between project and reality that Badiou's philosophy renders meaningless from the start. The novelty of Badiou's 'thinking' politics lies precisely in its capacity to strip away the fictions of political representation to the point where any distinction between real and unreal, possible and impossible, collapses. Politics is not, as Badiou's critique of political philosophy sets out in the opening chapter, an overt lesson in pragmatism, or in how best to resolve social conflicts in order to reach a reasonable consensus. On the contrary, consensus is only ever the limited by-product of a singular politics, springing up in the here

and now, held together through multiple and sometimes conflicting wills, and whose struggle, quite irrespective of the 'identity' of its subjects, has the potential to enter into almost any walk of life.

Unlike political pluralism and 'being-together' (18), politics has no substantiality or community beyond the real transformations it manages to bring about in any given situation. There are no historical constraints, no weight of tradition, no national, cultural, racial, ethnic, religious or corporate bonds that serve to limit the scope of a singular politics, for a singular politics has absolutely nothing to dissent from, react to or expect in relation to the situation at hand. In other words, it has no necessary *interest* in the situation. This is a crucial point which cannot be stressed too strongly. Not only are the subjects of a singular politics dispossessed in the above sense, they possess no set of demands which, once met, would bring an end to their revolt. Granted, what Badiou calls the 'political prescription' is aimed at transforming social 'contradictions' (e.g. racial discrimination, economic exploitation, governmental corruption). Indeed, prescriptions raise the prospect of real political change: that illegal immigrant workers in French hostels are entitled to unconditional legal status; that all UK students are entitled to a free education; that direct action by the landless workers of Brazil can win back land from the *grileiros*; that MOSOP can defeat Shell's commercial exploitation of the Niger Delta through a pan-ethnic alliance; that the ISM can prevent the Israeli army's demolition of Palestinian homes in Gaza and the West Bank; that the inquests of the ANWA(R) can help to eradicate the exploitation of women in Nepalese society through participation in Revolutionary People's War ...

However, it would be a mistake to regard these prescriptions as programmatic. Their singularity represents no one in

particular and engages whoever happens to be in the situation at any given time. '[A]nyone who lives and works here, belongs here.'<sup>18</sup> For Badiou, the anyone in question means everyone in principle, not just those with the power and resources to implement a particular policy, those career diplomats whose job it is to promote the interests of their constituencies. On the contrary, politics is that which escapes those with the power to define what politics is. Henceforth politics evacuates ('voids') the arena of representation by subtracting itself, on a point of principle, from every representative fiction: that the majority of illegal immigrants are not 'genuine' asylum seekers; that fee-paying students are making an 'investment' in their future 'employability'; that the political activities of the landless workers of Brazil are 'criminal'; that the petroleum industry is bringing much needed 'inward investment' to Nigeria; that ISM members are naive conduits of 'terrorism'; that the question of women's liberation in Nepal is 'secondary' to the class struggle 'as a whole' ...

For Badiou, politics reveals the discursive inconsistency of social statements and in so doing pierces through the common-sense fabric of the existing state of the situation. In this way politics *extends* the situation beyond the bounds of ordinary common sense. Beyond what seemed strictly impossible to begin with.

## II Distancing the State

Politics is not out to take on the State directly, but rather to work around it, to 'put the State at a distance' (145) from both its local *and* universal conditions. The examples which Badiou has in mind here – the 'Soviets', the Maoist 'liberated zones', the 'gathering of the Organisation Politique and of the collective of illegal

immigrant workers from the hostels' (152) – are meant to serve as 'models' for political reinvention. In this respect, those who believe that revolutionary politics is finished – because the government pays no heed to what people think – do not understand what politics is and what it is capable of today. The defining condition of the State is to exert power pure and simple, not only over those individuals who fall under its jurisdiction, but even and especially over those outsiders who do not. The State consists in the logic of a 'superpower' so infinitely superior to the situations whose parts it counts as one that any would-be adversary is always already foiled in advance (144).<sup>19</sup> As such, and so far as 'democracy' is concerned, the State observes the time-honoured tradition of making rhetorical statements: 'You, the people, have the right to air your views; and we, the ruling class, reserve the right to disregard them.' Unlike in the recent past, the State is no longer under any pressure to respond to genuine antagonisms in order to justify the consolidation of empires. It simply does whatever it wants under the benign pretext of providing security for human beings in a world of infinite uncertainty.<sup>20</sup>

The structural indifference of the State to all truth and the resulting implications for 'democracy' and 'freedom' are arguably the most pressing of contemporary political issues, although Badiou's treatment of them might be seen as somewhat cavalier. In Chapter 5 democracy is handled 'speculatively'. The question, Badiou informs us, is one of knowing whether and under what conditions democracy can count as a 'concept of philosophy', rather than as an object of urgent political rehabilitation; whereas, for its part, the question of 'freedom' doesn't attract any philosophical speculation at all.

Now, of course, this is entirely in keeping with Badiou's philosophical (or metapolitical) method. The idea that philosophy



should stand in speculative opposition to politics, should *judge* politics, is precisely what metapolitics rules out. Metapolitics retains the direct action of politics in thought, and thus prevents the philosopher from interfering in a situation that can do without his exalted commentary. The point is not to interpret the world, but to change it. However, having said this, one wonders whether the shortfall Badiou wants to expose between a 'possible' world and the one we already inhabit is *more or less* likely to result in the advent of universal rights, as opposed to the dull repetition of particular 'wrongs'.<sup>21</sup> Jacques Rancière has good reason in this respect to suggest that equality, far from demonstrating the universal truth of the collective, is simply the disagreement waged between all and sundry for a bigger share of the social pie:

Politics is the practice whereby the characteristic logic of equality takes the form of the processing of a wrong, in which politics becomes the argument of a basic wrong that ties in with some established dispute in the distribution of jobs, roles and places.<sup>22</sup>

Today, militant activists are by no means alone in attacking the spectacle of democracy, a fact confirmed by the clamour of countless pressure groups and parliamentary lobbyists, each seeking redress for a one-off instance of wrong. Confronted by this greedy spectacle, the militant might be forgiven for trading in his resistance to consumer rites for active participation in the least reactionary, most politically progressive form of democracy currently on offer. Is it perhaps conceivable that actually existing democracy, for all its 'democratic' limitations, holds out the possibility of a new and more dynamic set of responses to the capital-parliamentary settlement than we give it credit for?<sup>23</sup>

Nothing could be further from the truth. Badiou's outright hostility to such a 'concept' of democracy is axiomatic, and has in any case been stated more recently in no uncertain terms.<sup>24</sup> For Badiou democracy is intrinsically prone to the kind of liberal hysteria that wants to re-bind the Real to 'right-thinking' consensus. What type of 'democracy' is it, Badiou asks, that can bring the leader of the Front National, Jean-Marie Le Pen, to the brink of power at the French presidential elections of 2002? During such moments of seemingly monumental 'crisis' the people are quite capable of rallying the parliamentary politics of the lesser evil. But what type of parliamentary system is it that puts up with Le Pen and his ilk in the first place simply in order to cast its own racist policies in a more favourable, less 'extremist' light?<sup>25</sup> Episodes such as this confirm that fascism doesn't take root on the margins of society, but always emerges from within the existing status quo (in this instance originating from the acceptance of those racist politics generated by the immigration policies of Jospin's administration and those that preceded it – politics which, let's not forget, New Labour has outstripped in terms of both discrimination and brutality).

As for 'freedom', it is that which bypasses, as a matter of principle, this blinkered rallying to the 'constitution' in times of national crisis. The infinite 'limits' of freedom provide subjects with sufficient space to set about transforming their existing relation to the State during the course of a 'political truth procedure' (141–52).

As high as he raises the political stakes, then, for Badiou the choice remains no less clear cut: for politics to be thinkable it must resist, in more than simple abject resignation, the logic of the State and its accompanying 'democratic' hegemony, and in so doing raise the profile of political truths and justice.

### III A Revolutionary Politics?

As a work of political thought-praxis *Metapolitics* stands out on its own. Who else in contemporary philosophy has the audacity even to attempt such an implausible reinvention of militant politics, let alone is capable of bringing it off? Like all true philosophical visionaries, what Badiou is able to detect with perfect acuity – and he is certainly the first to do this since Althusser<sup>26</sup> – is the way in which politics exerts its pressure in unpredictable moments whose consequences always lag behind events, and which today remain to be thought. Ours is the time of experimentation and reinvention in the process of thinking through these political thoughts. Badiou will perhaps forgive me, then, if I conclude with some very brief remarks which at the time of writing remain unanswered by his philosophy.<sup>27</sup>

Like Althusser before him, Badiou has certainly responded to the call for revolutionary theory as the condition for reinvigorating revolutionary practice. Unlike Althusser, Badiou has achieved this without being sidetracked by the thorny question of Marxism's 'scientific' status. As he states emphatically in his chapter on Althusser, '*Marxism doesn't exist*', which is to say that Marxism is no longer an objectifiable, homogeneous discourse. The truth-value of 'Marxism' is instead a *subjective* matter, one reliant upon the logical consistency of acts and statements which affirm the singularity of a Marxist – or 'classist' – mode of politics. Any such historical mode is prescriptive, thus opening directly onto the material determination of a 'place' in which politics is free to set its own limits. There is no need for any such practice to be named 'Marxist', and indeed to do so would be to sacrifice the singularity of political names (34).<sup>28</sup>

Badiou's 'nominal' Marxism is doubly at odds with more orthodox Marxist perspectives in combining a radical anti-

scholasticism (henceforth there is a founding separation between political practice and any philosophy whatever, including a Marxist one) with an immanent logic. Suspicions regarding the ‘scientism’ of this logic might be raised given the so-called ‘numericality’ of the political truth procedure (147). However, any such suspicions would be misguided. For Badiou, science is not ‘applied’ to anything, by anyone. As with politics, science is in no need of philosophical mediation; the subject of a mode of politics is no more in need of a supporting Theory or philosophy than the scientist who conducts experiments in his laboratory. What we have in either case is a process of discovery immanent to the correct line of inquiry being followed, a ‘line’ (diagonal to the situation) which cannot be objectively known in advance. In politics, ‘only political militants think political novelty effectively’ (62). For its part philosophy is the apparatus for recording the truths generated by the political procedure – as well as Badiou’s three other truth conditions of philosophy: science, art and love.<sup>29</sup> The ‘revolutionary’ nature of such philosophy might thus be gauged in terms of the seizure in thought – through for example the classist mode of politics – of the singular intellectuality of which a political subject is capable. However, as Marx himself knew perfectly well (and it hardly takes a genius to work it out), such seizures are not destined to be the sole preserve of a Marxist philosophy, or even a class-based political practice.<sup>30</sup>

And yet it seems fair to say that if a historical mode of politics is to be genuinely transformative then it must involve a minimal understanding – an ‘apprehension’ – of the existing relations of capitalist production. For Badiou (knowledge of) capitalism is unable to determine events, and so has no direct grasp on political processes. Instead, capitalism is what prevents them from taking place by converting the multifarious desires of the

masses into the 'objective' needs of 'individual' consumers.<sup>31</sup> Now, in maintaining as much, Badiou is arguably endorsing a reductive theory of individualism<sup>32</sup> that fails to take into account the potentially revolutionary affects of capitalist reproduction. As Marx discovered – and this is obviously where Althusser's own unique contribution to the question lies – the unbinding of humanity from the scourge of calculated interest presents us with the ultimate challenge, since such 'humanity' depends for its very being on the reproduction of 1) the productive forces and 2) the existing relations of production of a social formation.<sup>33</sup>

Consider, as a named component of this ever-pre-given structure, 'rent', which 'instead of *binding man to nature*, has merely bound the exploitation of the land to competition'.<sup>34</sup> In the context of a capitalist system that subsumes one and all and is under *no* condition subject to limits beyond which capital cannot reproduce itself, the prospect of founding a general – or 'just' – interest would seem to involve a fairly restricted conception of the true, *dynamic* nature of capitalist domination-exploitation.<sup>35</sup> To put the case bluntly, in failing to take the question of the reproduction of capital seriously, Badiou is prone to misgauge (for better or worse) the prospects for 'real' political resistance and social change. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx alerts us to the danger when the only thinkable equality at stake, the only 'sovereign constitution' to speak of, is money: the unfixable 'constituting movement' of exchange value itself.

Badiou's characteristic response to the 'de-sacralisation' of capital is an ethical one. Writing in the spirit of Marx and Engels' *Manifesto*, capital is to be 'saluted', Badiou explains, for its 'destitution' of the social bond, its exposure of the 'pure multiple as ground of presentation'. Moreover, 'That this destitution operates through the most utter barbarity cannot disguise its

strictly *ontological* virtue.<sup>36</sup> Certainly Marx's grudging admiration for the irreverence of capital, for its denunciation of the One and its profanation of bourgeois social relations, is indisputable. But what is far more controversial is the suggestion that Marx's 'thought' of such relations entails no prior understanding of how they are to be transformed (although, as Badiou would argue, this lack of understanding by no means prevents such a transformation from occurring 'after the event'). Even if one accepts that doing and thinking politics are unconditional, and therefore immune to such understanding, it seems to me that without it the concept of revolution – i.e. that which interrupts the conditions for the reproduction of a mode of production<sup>37</sup> – is unsustainable.

Now, of course, Badiou in no way claims to rely on the Marxist concept of revolution – he even distances himself from it<sup>38</sup> – and his decision to forgo it is no doubt made for some of the reasons outlined above. Essentially, although admittedly I am stating the problem rather simplistically here, 'revolution' would only serve to frustrate a truly singular politics, bound up as it is with the totalising practices of mass movements in the wake of May '68 (44). Against the pathological desire for unity and totality, for the definitive resolution of social struggles, Badiou wants instead to tease out their 'contradictions' further by pushing them to the point of *genuine* happenings. A singular politics exists precisely in order to (re)think the concept of 'failure', and failed revolution, 'in interiority', i.e. in a non-synthetic, non-dialectical manner (43–4, 46, 127). But how can a popular struggle progress when, for Badiou, the political truth procedure *and* the social transformation it claims to bring about seemingly operate at the same level? It is one thing to say that politics provides a place of ongoing resistance for subjects poised on the *brink* of social change. It is quite another to claim that

politics is the site of transformation, actively transforming the situation into something *new*. But this is exactly what Badiou's metapolitics would have us believe. If 'revolution' and 'dialectic' really are the remnants of old ways of thinking politics then it is difficult to see what 'change' could mean in this instance. Arguably Badiou needs to set out criteria by which genuinely novel transformations might emerge through the course of political truth procedures without succumbing to statist configurations.<sup>39</sup> Such criteria might then enable political militants to decide on the *type* of novelty at stake in politics today, rather than simply holding firm to truths irrespective of whether they offer new ways of thinking.

Marx's ultimate objective was the transformation of society – albeit by way of a 'transition' to communism that would no longer appear viable today. Whether such transformation was to happen 'all at once', i.e. as human perfection *sub specie aeternitatis*, or by degrees, i.e. on condition of the so-called 'revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat',<sup>40</sup> did not alter the basic principle that some sort of 'progress' should be involved. Such progress arguably lies at the heart of any would-be politics of emancipation, since without the power to bring new worlds into being politics can only stand opposed, and has nothing to fight *for*.

### Notes on the Translation

Badiou's thought distinguishes politics in the generic sense from any political orientation whatever. It is crucial to recognise that when Badiou uses the word 'politics' he is not talking about this or that variety: liberal politics, parliamentary politics, Nazi politics, Marxist politics, etc. For Badiou, the fundamental distinction is between 'politics' [*la politique*] as singular thought, and

‘the political’ [*le politique*] as the politicking synonymous with capitalist-parliamentarianism. Likewise, ‘a politics’ [*une politique*] is a singular sequence – ‘instances of politics’ [*des politiques*] in the plural – through which politics as such is realised, rather than any particular variety.

Badiou’s lengthy treatment of Sylvain Lazarus’ work deserves a special mention. ‘Intellectuality’ [*intellectualité*], ‘intellectual configuration’ [*dispositif d’intellectualité*], ‘that which is thought in thought’ [*ce qui est pensé dans la pensée*] and ‘thinkability’ [*pensabilité*] all add up to a political discourse which is both rationalist and non-philosophical. Like Gramsci, Badiou sees political intelligence as that which shoots forth organically from within the situation, albeit without being directed by the party. *Pensé/pensée*: in those cases where undue confusion arose between the past participle and the noun I have opted for the verb ‘to conceptualise’ (not to be confused with the concept itself, which always sacrifices the singularity of a political thought process). The so-called ‘places of the name’ [*lieux du nom*], along with the places of science, ideology, overdetermination, etc., dealt with in Chapter 3, might strike those with little or no knowledge of Badiou’s work as somewhat incongruous. But it is important to recognise that Badiou is speaking of places in the topological sense, not the geopolitical sense.

A place [*lieu*] is not ‘grounds’, or a ground, for action. Like a topological space, a political place is that which, despite undergoing ‘continuous deformation’, still retains the same properties. Like the homeomorphic spaces (sphere, cylinder, hyperboloid, annulus) that stretch into and out of one another while remaining geometrically identical, political places (subject, mode, name) are unaffected by superficial ‘developments’ in mainstream political culture, e.g. the formation of a ‘new’ political party. They are worlds unto themselves.



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