

MASTERS & DISCIPLES: INSTITUTION, PHILOSOPHY, PRAXIS

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‘Discipline, comme tu saignes!’
—René Char

‘Consequently, a true master [*Meister*] is at bottom only he who can
provoke the other to transform himself through his act.’
—Slavoj Žižek

I. THE SITUATION

Our call for submissions to this issue read as follows:

To mark the English translation of *L'Être et l'événement* as *Being and Event*, the journal *Cosmos and History* will publish a special issue on the work of the philosopher Alain Badiou. The approach of this journal is to publish work that goes beyond the merely exegetical and to this end we would like contributors to take up the challenge Badiou raises in *Being and Event* when he says:

The categories that this book deploys, from the pure multiple to the subject, constitute the general order of a thought such that it can be *practised* across the entirety of the contemporary system of reference. These categories are available for the service of scientific procedures just as they are for those of analysis or politics. They attempt to organize an abstract vision of the requirements of the epoch.

We invite contributors to this special issue to respond to Badiou's challenge and deploy his categories in thinking a particular situation—be it political, artistic, scientific or amorous.

Although it has taken nearly two decades for *Being and Event* to become available in English, there are already an enormous number of conferences, articles, translations, introductions and monographs dedicated to Badiou and his work (see the bibliography

in this edition of *Cosmos and History*). We find works of Badiou translated directly from the French editions (*Deleuze, Ethics, Saint Paul, Metapolitics, Handbook of Inaesthetics, Briefings on Existence, Manifesto for Philosophy, Being and Event*); essays or extracts from existing publications, on a variety of matters (politics, art, etc.) and appearing in a range of journals (e.g., *Diacritics, Art Forum*, etc.); created or assembled works not appearing in such form (such as *Infinite Thought, On Beckett* or *Theoretical Writings*); new pieces written especially for translation (e.g., the many ‘Author’s prefaces’ now available).

If one casts an eye over the existing commentaries, they seem preponderantly to fall into a small number of significant categories. First, the introductions, ranging from the extended and well-informed monographs to shorter articles in specialist journals. Second, the critiques, which tend to focus either on Badiou’s general tendencies, or on particular claims that he makes (e.g., *Think Again*, most of the essays in *Communication and Cognition* Vols. 36 & 37, and in *Polygraph* 17, etc.). Third, the assimilation of Badiou’s terminology and themes into more general projects, as a kind of grab-bag of general concepts for use in varying situations. But what we were calling for was something a little different, a fourth way: a *systematic* deployment of Badiou’s categories.

It’s not that this hasn’t been attempted. Oliver Feltham, the English translator of *Being and Event*, and a contributor to the current issue of *Cosmos and History*, has done so in regard to a local Australian political event in ‘Singularity Happening in Politics: The Aboriginal Tent Embassy, Canberra 1972.’¹ But such an ‘application’ has been surprisingly rare, to the point where it seems people might appear chary of being mistaken for a merely uncritical disciple, dogmatist, or dinosaur. (It is noteworthy that such accusations have, in the Anglophone world at least, been flung at ‘Lacanian’, a state of affairs about which Slavoj Žižek has often fulminated).² It has been, as we have said, much more the case that critics have wanted to pose different questions, or try to get different things out of Badiou’s corpus to date.

II. MASTERS & DISCIPLES ≠ FRIENDS & ENEMIES ≠ FATHERS & SONS

This brings up the rather boring relationship between a master’s writings, a systematic philosophy, discipleship and commentary. Badiou’s great treatise *Being and Event* has just become available in English, so the system-building volume at the base of his reputation will be accessible to a new audience. This adds to the already-existing books translated straight from the French, the anthologies composed of occasional writings, ‘exclusive’ interviews, and essays extracted from other volumes, all subjected to the exigencies of commodity-production, legal entitlement and bio-physical limitations. This situation—hardly worth mentioning in itself, it may seem, simply the banal conditions of contemporary book marketing—should, on the contrary, force us to reappraise Badiou’s

1. In *Communication & Cognition*, vol. 37, nos. 3 & 4, 2004, pp. 225-245. See also Barbara Formis, ‘Event and ready-made: Delayed sabotage’, in the same volume, pp. 247-261.

2. For example, see the recent film *Žižek!*, in which our eponymous hero has a go at an off-screen deconstructionist on precisely this point.

own accounts of the dissemination of thought, philosophical thought. Indeed, Badiou is undoubtedly one of the few contemporary philosophers to factor in the problem of the dissemination of thought into his thought itself.

A tiny article—which, to our knowledge, *nobody* in the Anglophone world has yet translated, anthologized, or even adequately discussed—is crucial here. This article, entitled, ‘What is a philosophical institution? Or: address, transmission, inscription’ can be found in *Conditions*.³ In this article of less than eight pages, Badiou elaborates an entire theory of the transmission of philosophy. Without an institution, no transmission; without transmission, no philosophy. How to think, however, this institution outside, first, established actualities such as the university which captured philosophy after Kant, and, second, without simply abstracting from or returning to classical forms of philosophical institution (the Academy, the Stoa, the Garden, etc.)? Moreover, how to think the role of the *disciples* or of the *friends* of philosophy? And so, third, how to avoid characterizing a philosophical institution in the *religious* terms—however admirable and radical—of a Quaker ‘society of friends’?

For Badiou, a philosophical institution can have no instrumental value, precisely because one can never apportion ends, aims or finalities to philosophy. Philosophy must, despite its most stringent and rigorous conclusions, testify to what he calls ‘the interminable imperative of continuing’.

If philosophy itself institutes nothing but the void of an address, the transmission of a philosophy requires its disciples to invent new modes of thinking adequate to supporting the singularity of this empty address; these disciples work to transform the emergence of this void address into letters, into marks that subsist and can circulate along routes and through places that previously would have found these marks unthinkable and/or unacceptable. And these letters can only move as conflict, as antagonism, as committed incomprehension: a philosophical disciple doesn’t really know (though he or she may desperately want to know), and knows that, though he or she can never know they know, they must place their names and bodies behind the work of their own obscure enquiries. The disciple often demands that the master be the One, even as he poses the master the most infuriating problems, induces the master to cover himself further, to drape the possibility that the garment might gape to reveal...what? The nothing beneath?⁴ Disciples must *force* something, illegitimately, into being.

Yet it is not publicity at which such disciples and institutions aim, but *inscriptions*, knotted, difficult, forever being done, undone, redone. It is only by such means that a philosophy becomes what it is—in transformed institutions by which it can encounter *other* philosophies. Hence a philosophical institution ‘is not the guardian of philosophy,

3. Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, Paris, Seuil, 1992, pp. 83-89. It has been translated for the first time into English by A. J. Bartlett for this issue of *Cosmos and History*, with Badiou’s permission.

4. See, for instance, Badiou’s ‘Afterword’, subtitled ‘Some replies to a demanding friend’, in Peter Hallward, (ed.), *Think Again*, London and New York, Continuum, 2004, pp. 232-237; and his ‘Author’s Preface’, to *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. R. Brassier and A. Toscano, London and New York, Continuum, 2004, pp. xiii-xv.

but of its historicity. It is thus the guardian *of* philosophies. It is the knotted plural of philosophies as resistance in time, which often means: resistance to the times? It is in such institutions-in-process—‘truth-bodies’, perhaps, in the language of Badiou’s new book *Logiques des mondes*—that disciples read, translate, re-edit the texts of the master; squabble about the philosophy in question; relate it to classical problems in the history of thought; relate it to other philosophies; to the world as they find it transfigured in the unprecedented dark light of these new little letters, etc.

But, in what one might call this ‘adherence’ (we don’t use the word ‘fidelity’, for reasons which will become apparent) of the disciple—an adherence which does not, of course, preclude vicious and unforgiving attacks on their master’s texts—they can tend towards becoming policemen of the state of philosophy, the place in which all the *elements* of (a) philosophy, having been torn from their original situations, are turned into new sets, verified, legitimated, *included*. Using the terms of Badiou’s own schematization of set-theory, one can say that disciples can end up doing the work of the *state* of philosophy, the transformation of what’s presented into representation, through their ceaseless unbinding, and re-countings of the philosopher’s words. In this sense, the operations of disciples can be schematized by the power-set and union operations of set-theory; if disciples are the source of philosophy’s growth and dissemination, they are also potential agents of its ‘statification’. The putative universality of philosophy must always run the risk of the state.

Yet, in his ‘Author’s Preface’ to *Theoretical Writings*, Badiou seems to modify the position of ‘What is a philosophical institution?’

[I]n what sense can this present book really be said to be one of my books? Specifically, one of my books of philosophy? Is it not rather a book by my friends Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano? After all, they gathered and selected the texts from several different books, which for the most part were not strictly speaking ‘works’ but rather collections of essays (xiv).

If the question of *forms of writing* is critical in this context, it is because a philosophical institution must always bind itself to the singularity of a philosopher’s *dicta*, and it is thus no accident that Badiou himself is very attentive to such a necessity. Each philosopher invents or constructs his or her own form (and the aforementioned ‘Preface’ accordingly opens with a list of major philosophical forms). We want to suggest that, although Badiou is a systematic philosopher, his own system is one that complicates the difference between ‘central works’ and ‘occasional essays’. Certainly, his major works to date are *Being and Event* and, now, the just-released *Logiques des mondes*. Yet, as Badiou put it in a recent talk in Melbourne, these books are like ‘atomic bombs’, quite useless as effective weaponry in themselves. It is their mere existence, or, rather, the ongoing research that produced them, that supports the truly engaged and effective interventions evident in the shorter books, articles and interviews.

Philosophy would be nothing without its masters; yet a master requires disciples to be a master at all. Recently, Badiou has started to refer explicitly to this work of discipleship under the rubric of ‘friendship’, a very interesting nominal shift. If it’s probably a bit

rich (presumptuous?) for a living philosopher to refer to his living disciples *as* disciples, and if the rubric of ‘friendship’ itself has an impeccable philosophical pedigree, this nonetheless opens a question as to the true subjects of thought. In fact, we detect a double division here within Badiou’s thinking of an institution: the division between *master and disciples*, on the one hand, and between *friends and enemies*, on the other. Both are to be distinguished from *fathers and sons* (and not only for the sexist implications of the latter).

This, however, suggests another way of thinking about the relation between master and disciple, a wavering and uncertain line of division *within* philosophy and its institutions.⁵ Some indications: 1) the difference between ‘friends’ and ‘disciples’; 2) the difference between ‘philosophy’ and ‘history of philosophy’; 3) the difference between ‘situation’ and ‘state’; 4) the difference between ‘forms of writing’ and their ‘re-presentation’. After all, for Badiou, the very exemplum of a subject engaged in a militant fidelity to an event is Saint Paul, the greatest of all ‘disciples’, the one who invents the first known universal institution in human history. It is not Christ who is the hero of subjectivity for Badiou, but Paul. On the other hand, as Badiou notes, explicating St. Paul: ‘Philosophy knows only disciples. But a son-subject is the opposite of a disciple-subject, because he is one whose life is beginning.’⁶ The problem here is, then, the relation between ‘disciples’ and ‘friends’.

Since, as Badiou insists at the beginning of *Being and Event*, a contemporary philosophy must circulate between ontology, modern inventions of subjectivity and its own history, the *disciples and their work must be treated as integral to the elaboration of philosophy itself*. A philosophy must attend to the problem of its own institution, to philosophical institutions, to the creation of new forms of institution. It must attend to the problem of friends and disciples. Following this mobile line takes us directly to questions at the heart of Badiou’s philosophy, to his refashioned concept of *praxis*.

III. THE CONCEPT OF PRAXIS

For Badiou, we say, praxis composes a knot: it is simultaneously thought, act and category. The subject, a category that can be deployed ‘across the entirety of the contemporary system of reference’, does the work of tying and retying the strands of thought and act. The subject, whose being is void, constitutes in and as itself the locus of praxis which brings ‘thought and being’ together under the injunction of the Same. The subject is what it is to think and to be at the same time—the ‘junction of a disjunction’.

Praxis is in the service of scientific procedures, artistic configurations, emancipatory politics and love. But as the knot constituted of categories, concepts and acts, praxis is in no way the predicate of the functioning of this knot nor the determinant of the existence

5. This immanent division seems to be borne out by Badiou himself when in ‘What is a philosophical institution?’ he suggests that ‘in the circumstances of writing, the master makes a disciple of himself’, p. 87.

6. Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003, p. 59.

of its strands. Rather, these three strands of the knot demand both their compossibility and their name. Praxis is the composition of, and the name for, the service of the subject whose procedure will have been decided by the situation. This situation (all situations being founded through the event) is that which endures despite the attentive recounting of what it counts by the state. It is the situation then which ‘decides’ the praxiological conditions for the subject. Or, to put it another way, the situation decides, qua situation, for which procedure the category of the subject is the contingent and finite support.

Like walking slowly, praxis, for the Greeks, was the privilege of ‘free men.’ Marx considered praxis in a similar way, though perhaps not as the privilege of free men but more as that which both constituted and supported man as free. So our knot knots together thought and act, the category of the subject, the situation for which this subject is subject, and the free man in the temporality of the *future anterior*. But what *is* a ‘free man’? It is certainly not a subject; and yet it most certainly is. The trivial yet compulsive liberal definition of freedom attests only to a limitless dispersal, a casting off of all that is not ‘the free man’—the (therefore) sovereign *individual*. The individual always *knows* ‘that which it is not’—and by extension ‘what must not be’—which is why it is sovereign. In passing we can see that ‘deciding for the exception’ is a banal rather than exceptional concept. The subject, our subject is, as we can see, subject to the discipline—the cruel discipline—of certain conditions: the pure multiple, the event, the situation, the practice of the procedures and their sustaining under the category of the ‘same’ or truth. ‘Our’ free man, which is to say man *as* free, is in truth a subject, whereas ‘the individual, in truth, is nothing’. The subject ‘knows’ nothing, in the liberal sense of the word. Rather, the subject is the extent of its enquiries conditioned absolutely by its conditions. It has no knowledge to speak of. It is not a bridge between predicate and end, just as justice is not located at the ‘end of a state program’. Praxis, we can say, knows no ends. Its being is infinite and the truth for which it is the support is likewise eternal.

So why praxis? Perhaps symptomatically, we have not yet mentioned that category which is critical to any praxis today, that of *courage*. What does this courage amount to? It amounts to continuing. Courage is the courage to continue in praxis, to act to sustain and extend any series of situated enquiries across the entirety of a situation—a situation that knows no end. To be a subject is to be the courageous support of a truth. It is through the courage of the subject that the thought of truth is given being as a thought-practice. As such, courage amounts to the practice of thought. And a ‘thought is nothing other than the desire to have done with the exorbitant excesses of the state’. Praxis is thus the courageous work of a *free* man under the condition of a truth against the state. Above all, praxis is a name for risk. It is a throw of the dice by those who are nothing, but chance to be everything.

IV. IN THIS ISSUE

One must beware the Sirens yearning to lure the philosophic voyager onto the rocks, even if one is a Mallarméan and finds that Sirens have considerable poetic appeal. The

articles collected in this special issue certainly attempt to avoid this deleterious end, whether through lashing themselves to the mast(er), or through plugging their ears with wax. Here then, without revision-ing summary or summarily re-presenting, we present the names of those who have practiced-thought in response to our call: A. J. Bartlett, Lorenzo Chiesa, Oliver Feltham, Zachary Fraser, Sam Gillespie, Lindsey Hair, Alex Ling, Toula Nicolacopoulos and George Vassilacopoulos, Nina Power, Brian Anthony Smith and Alberto Toscano. We also thank Alain Badiou for permission to publish the essential article from *Conditions*.

In addition to the articles we have also attempted to review as many of Badiou's books in English as possible. In addition to a long review article by Justin Clemens on *Logiques des mondes*, we also include Jon Roffe on *Being and Event*, Mairéad Phillips on *Metapolitics*, Graham Storey on *On Beckett*, A. J. Bartlett on *Briefings on Existence*, Alex Ling on *Ethics*, Mark Hewson on *Infinite Thought*, Chris van Rompaey on *Think Again*, Liam O'Donnell on *St Paul*, as well as Elizabeth Newman reviewing a collection of essays on *Jacques Lacan and the Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. We also include a comprehensive bibliography compiled by Paul Ashton.

And—on the basis that no Platonist can be allowed to escape into Ideas entirely unscathed by Poetry—we have included a poem by Dominique Hecq, entitled 'follisophy', which responds directly to Badiou's work.

If one must be an *activist* (a 'militant') in a truth process, the creation of a philosophical *system* is itself a protracted *act*—and this act itself is something that scrambles the polarities of closed and open, centre and margins, structure and occasion, continuation and punctuation. As Badiou notes early in *Saint Paul*, the hostility of the contemporary world to philosophy is evident in the repression of the very names of philosophy's conditions. Thus 'culture' obliterates 'art', 'technology' obliterates 'science', 'management' obliterates 'politics', and 'sexuality' obliterates 'love': 'The system: culture-technics-management-sexuality—that has the immense merit of being homogenous to the market, and of which all the terms, at least, designate a rubric of commercial presentation—is the nominal modern recovery of the system art-science-politics-love...'⁷

Thus the unavowed system of anti-systematic thought is in some way homogeneous with the system of the times; declarative systematic thought (philosophy), as we said above, attempts to rupture with the system of the times. Or, again, the latter attempts to take account of the thoughts that do attempt such a rupture (the four conditions). Thus 'system' is integral to philosophy. Not every system is philosophical, of course, but every philosophy, every true philosophy, must aim at systematicity. Hence the importance of the 'and' in the title of *Being and Event*; 'and' is precisely *the* philosophical injunction, the injunction of system. *Chez* Badiou, being is dealt with by mathematics, while events are the province of the conditions. Neither are, strictly speaking, the proper job of philosophy. What philosophy must do is construct a way of bridging the gap without reduction. Philosophy is the *ampersand* composing a discourse of, if we may, cosmos and

7. Badiou, *Saint Paul*, p. 13.

history.

But let there be no confusion: there can be no simple opposition between a ‘closed’ system and an ‘open’ becoming. Whether covertly moralized or not, such denominations are insufficient to treat the novelty of a philosophical system in act. Badiou’s system is produced in an endless circulation through the conditions, returning to them again and again, in different forms (extended treatises, handbooks, articles, oral presentations, etc.), constantly permitting them to norm and re-divert existing propositions of his philosophy.

It thus seems to us that there is no *principled* difference between the ‘original’ ‘meditations’ of and in *Being and Event* and the varied articles re-collected in other volumes and other languages: all are part of the ongoing *act of system*, whether or not Badiou himself actually envisaged these articles one day sitting together in an English translation. This act is novelty itself, insofar as no existing names or concepts are adequate to capturing the shape or rhythm of its elaboration. This system-act, integral to the definition of philosophy, is what tries to validate the contemporary compossibility of philosophy’s conditions—that is, their heterogeneous sheltering, a void peace of their discontinuity.

In other words, there is no philosophical system without disciples, or, at least, a seething and active host of bizarre patchwork creatures traversed by the mobile line of the friend-disciple division. If they can get it together, knotting inscriptions against the tendency to representation, a new philosophical institution may well emerge. To parody the jingle from the popular Australian soap-opera *Neighbours*—with all the horror that the very word and concept may conjure up—*that’s when good disciples become good friends*.

We would therefore like to thank our contributors for their dedication and their courage, through which, to again quote Badiou in Melbourne in 2006: ‘finally, we have always to become the contrary of our masters’.

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