

BOOK REVIEW

BACKS TO THE WALL: A READING OF ALAIN BADIOU'S *METAPOLITICS*

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Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London, Verso, 2005. ISBN: 184467035X.

Metapolitics is a small book but, given the wide range and scope of the ten essays that comprise it, it is more than a little difficult to give a concise précis of its contents. In the 'Preface to the English Edition', however, Badiou gives us, in his idiosyncratic Gallic use of numbered reasons or arguments, a list of four types of essays you will find in this book; 1) polemical essays, 2) essays of commentary and support, 3) examinations of major categories, and 4) philosophical prescriptions, which consists of the final essay only, 'Politics as Truth Procedure', and is, according to Badiou, 'the most important essay in the book' (xxxvi). This last essay would appear to be, given Badiou's qualification, a pertinent choice to highlight in a review given that one might find there something 'controversial'. And it is true that it is, for this reviewer at least, the most problematic essay in the book. However, my intention here is to highlight the *first* essay. My reason for doing so is simple. There is much to like in this book, yet one can be guilty of skipping over the good bits in a hasty search for the inconsistencies and contentious arguments. So my aim here is to say why I like Badiou's *Metapolitics* and why I think it is important.

I recently overheard an exchange between a patron and one of the waiting staff at *Wall Two 80* in Balaclava, a fashionable suburb of Melbourne, Australia. *Wall*, as it is more commonly called, is one of those establishments that have, over the years, attracted a large and loyal following. The type of clientele these establishments attract is the caffeine-addicted Melbournian who loves to socialize or read the paper whilst drinking their coffee. I am a weekend regular at this particular café. I, too, have become accustomed to the excellent coffee—I've not once had a bad one. But I am also attracted by

the more-than-usually standoffish attitude of the staff. They are neither unpleasant nor rude, but they by no means go out of their way to make your patronage feel particularly welcome or even desired. While I was a little taken aback at first, I have nevertheless become accustomed to their reserve as far as customer service standards go; it makes the insincere attentions of sales assistants elsewhere seem excessive and vulgar.

At *Wall Two 80* you must go to the counter to place your order. If you sit down and wait for a member of staff to come to you, you would be waiting all day. But, on this particular Sunday, this is what two gentlemen did who sat down at the table next to mine. They sat down and waited to be served. After some time, one of the men must have caught the eye of a waiter, who shortly appeared. This customer let it be known that he had been waiting for a while and the waiter informed him that he could take his order, but that it was usual for customers to place their order at the bar. The customer disputed this procedure, citing a previous visit on which he had been served at his table. The waiter simply smiled, took his order and left.

What was going on here? You don't need to be drinking coffee in a café in Balaclava to see this kind of exchange. Everywhere, all over the city, in shops and restaurants, on public transport, in places of work, in educational institutions, people engage in essentially unsatisfying disputes over facts and circumstances that are not in the power of either party to control or change. It is such a common experience of our social existence and yet it is one that does not lend itself much to criticism or analysis. While we may be confronted with the consequences of decades-old conflicts in the Middle East on the nightly news broadcast and console ourselves with feeling helpless and consequently injured to the difference we can make to such violence and destruction, we less often confront the consequences of our daily interactions, such as the one I witnessed at *Wall*.

As fortune would have it, I had a copy of Alain Badiou's *Metapolitics* in front of me at the time. I was able to imagine, with the help of Badiou's political prescriptions, a scenario in which this gentleman's complaint might have identified a genuine injustice in the operation of *Wall Two 80*. Had, for instance, every other customer been served at their table and, when the two men next to me, rightly indignant, questioned the waiter, only to be told that it was customary for customers to place their order at the bar, well, then, this man would have had a case. Surely *Wall* would have overstepped the bounds of non-discriminatory practice, and, in identifying this errant gap in *Wall's* non-egalitarian customer service, this man would have had legitimate grounds to be identified in equal measure with the rest of *Wall's* clientele.

But I am getting too far ahead of myself. The fact that I submit my reading of Badiou's *Metapolitics* to an extended personal anecdote follows through on the (personal) injunction issued (to me) by various readings of Badiou's work at any one time, incomplete or imperfect though those various readings may be. One cannot fail to feel somehow implicated or embroiled in the very object of one's study, or such is my understanding of it. One cannot escape culpability, not least of all because, in Badiou's reconfiguration of politics, political choice is taken away from the objectivity of the collective, yet neither is it affected by the vagaries of subjective opinion.

The choice of political allegiance appears as one which is separated from the constraints of collective groups, and which falls within the competent realm of personal decisions. But, symmetrically, this choice is no longer subordinated to pre-existent ethical maxims, and even less to a spiritual or juridical doctrine of human rights (M 6).

This ‘double separation’ inters the would-be political activist, as much as it may entice her, to accept the ineluctable consequences of following such stringent conditions. Therefore, the very path upon which she sets out could end up, by the process of travelling along it, taking her somewhere she had not anticipated. Such is the nature of a politics ‘unbound’. Alternatively, she may have to concede defeat and turn back in the face of internal inconsistencies.

In fact, choice has its intelligibility neither in the objective collective nor in a subjectivity of opinion. Its intelligibility is internal, in the sequential process of action, just as an axiom is intelligible only through the application of the theory that it supports (M 6-7).

This is why I begin my review with a situation. The situation I have presented is not a very noteworthy one, nor is it, on the surface of it, a particularly politically charged one either. Nevertheless, if we are prepared to take Badiou at his word, then metapolitics must speak of the situation as we find it. Complacency is not an attitude that Badiou tolerates. What passes for politics these days is a far cry from the definition Badiou would give it in order to reclaim it as a philosophical concept. As such, politics would be that which ‘reveals the discursive inconsistency of social statements and in so doing pierces through the commonsense fabric of the existing state of the situation’ (M xv), as Jason Barker suggests in his translator’s introduction.

Metapolitically speaking, however, Badiou must first speak out against those ‘Arch-complacents’. He is unremittingly remorseless when it comes to his analysis of what he sees as partisan ‘political philosophy’. The opening essay of *Metapolitics* pulls no punches and we are left with a very clear idea of where Badiou stands on this particular brand of ‘Pharisaism’. The polemic against ‘political philosophy’ takes for its concrete example the French edition of Hannah Arendt’s lectures on Kant’s political philosophy, edited by Myriam Revault d’Allonnes. Badiou focuses his particular attention on the positive wrap given to *public opinion* and *consensus* by Kant-Arendt-Revault d’Allonnes at the expense of ‘univocal and tyrannical’ truth. In relation to which, Badiou has this to say:

The antinomy of truth and debate is a bad joke. Except, of course, if one deems it necessary to assert *special rights* for falsity and for lying. In this case, it would instead be necessary to say the following: debate, *which confers rights without norms upon falsity and lying*, constitutes the very essence of politics. But what Revault d’Allonnes calls ‘the courage of judgement’ is more like the laziness of those who are sheltered from every norm and see their errors or their lies protected by right (M 14-5).

According to Arendt’s and Revault-d’Allonnes’ claims, for philosophy to be faithful to ‘democracy’ so conceived, it is necessary for it to ‘sever “the” political from the protocols of decision, to reduce it to the judgement of the spectator, and to think of debate as

a plural confrontation of opinions without truth' (M 16).

In this light, I wish to contend that the scene I witnessed at *Wall* epitomizes this 'type' of political indecisionism that currently exists, and the extent to which its structure is unquestioningly repeated and perpetuated. The capitalist-parliamentarianism that organizes the political machinery that administers the State also structures our daily interactions; hence, we witness these types of fruitless 'debates' where the 'public plurality of opinions' (M 16) marks the position of not only our parliamentary parties but the everyday interactions of the man on the street. Badiou could not state the case more clearly: 'It is obvious we are living through the unconditioned primacy of opinions' (M 17), but what may be unclear is just how endemic it actually is. It was brought to my attention, whilst reading *Metapolitics*, that the instances are manifold and localized. People love to hear the sound of their own voice. The concatenation of voices, then, is the ideological wall of noise threatening to drown out any rehabilitation of the 'theme of truth'.

Too often, members of the public display a belief in their ability to manipulate and control the world to satisfy the claims made by their ego. This temptation betrays a desire for conflict, however unpleasant, superficial and unwarranted. If a person is not able to express their opinion freely, they instinctively feel that their rights are being violated. Essentially the man at *Wall* was telling the waiter, 'As contingent and superficial as my existence is, I have a right to exercise the public use of my judgement, and there's nothing you can do to stop me'. How do these people think that a place like *Wall Two 80* could continue to function if it had to kowtow to the dictates of every customer that walked through its door? Essentially, they *don't think*. As long as they can *debate* the issue, they feel validated and, dare I say it, vindicated.

Far from bearing witness to the disintegrating fabric of social reality, these kinds of altercations are in fact necessary to the smooth running of inherently antagonistic social relations. If one were reading Nietzsche, these daily antagonisms would be seen to be, not signs or symptoms of an imminent social degeneration and decline, but signs and symptoms of a society *already* degenerated, *already* in decline. But what can Nietzsche do or say that does not elicit in his reader an ironical sneer, all the while said reader sips her latté, giving into the 'the necessity for stronger and stronger and more and more frequent stimulants' (Twilight of the Idols)? One is also the target, when one submits to drinking coffee in cafés, of a designation favoured by the current political climate in order to maintain an unchallenged allegiance to conservative mores, that is, to a market economy, which relentlessly marginalizes and discredits any opposition, however nominal and ineffectual.

Metapolitics is effective inasmuch as we are given a means by which the state of the situation may be questioned, measured and put at a distance which invariably opens up the possibility of politics as thought-praxis. In order to prepare the ground, however, one need not be engaged solely with analyses of the works of so-called 'political philosophy'; one need only go so far as the local café; more often than not, not even as far as that.