

THE POLITICAL THOUGHT OF ALAIN BADIOU¹

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ABSTRACT: This paper is intended as an admiring, but ultimately critical, examination of Badiou's metaphysics and its grounding in his politics. I have chosen to examine these dimensions of his thought for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, while Badiou's metaphysics may be his most original contribution to continental philosophy, he remains far more famous for his voluminous contributions to radical left wing thought. It is therefore important to introduce the philosophical grounding for his positions to as more general audience. Secondly, Badiou's metaphysical tomes are famously dense and often difficult to summarize. Part of this is due to his use of complex mathematics and mathematical terms, and part of it is due to his occasionally unclear writing style. Grounding Badiou's metaphysics in an analysis of his politics help us better see what the point of the former is, while demonstrating the systematic nature of his philosophical architecture more fully.

KEYWORDS: Politics; Badiou; Zizek; Hegel

INTRODUCTION²

Since the publication of *Being and Event*³ in 1988, Alain Badiou has established himself as inarguably the most ambitious philosopher in the Continental tradition in quite some time. His rapidly growing oeuvre has come to encompass metaphysics, ethics, politics, art, cinema and more. Badiou has truly taken it upon himself to build and defend a genuine philosophical system (once a faux pas par excellence) intended to stand next the great architectural edifices of Hegel, Kant, and of course Plato. The

¹ Parts of this paper were originally published in a different format in *Critical Legal Thinking*. They have been republished and altered with permission.

² My colleague Christopher Satoor was helpful in reading over earlier iterations of this paper.

³ See Alain Badiou. *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham. (London, UK. Continuum Press, 2005)

result has been something of a philosophical scandal, with some scholars beholden to the skepticism of “democratic materialism” reacting critically, while others who long for a system have taken Badiou at his word that he is the real deal.⁴

All this makes thorough engagement with his work ever more important, especially as his influence on a new generation of continental philosophers becomes ever more apparent.⁵ In the English speaking world, many of Badiou’s works have been translated slowly and in some cases only quite recently. This makes the necessity of a systematic engagement with his work all the more critical. This paper is intended as an admiring, but ultimately critical, examination of Badiou’s metaphysics and its grounding in his politics. I have chosen to examine these dimensions of his thought for two interrelated reasons. Firstly, while Badiou’s metaphysics may be his most original contribution to continental philosophy, he remains far more famous for his voluminous contributions to radical left wing thought.⁶ It is therefore important to introduce the philosophical grounding for his positions to as more general audience. Secondly, Badiou’s metaphysical tomes are famously dense and often difficult to summarize. Part of this is due to his use of complex mathematics and mathematical terms, and part of it is due to his occasionally unclear writing style. Grounding Badiou’s metaphysics in an analysis of his politics help us better see what the point of the former is, while demonstrating the systematic nature of his philosophical architecture more fully.

I will be offering a critical analysis of both dimensions of his thought, though primarily focusing on the latter. Firstly, I will address the metaphysical core of his philosophy. Badiou is committed to combatting historicism in philosophy, which he feels is both wrong in itself and conducive to unfortunate cultural tendencies.⁷ His metaphysics can be understood as a call for continental philosophers to return to the Platonic roots of the discipline. Badiou wishes us to re-enact Plato’s gesture of asserting the eternal truths of mathematics against the Sophists.⁸ His entire metaphysical architecture is intended to prove that truth is possible in philosophy, and that we need not cede so much ground to the nihilistic anti-philosophers who claim truth is, at best, only a matter of language and power.

⁴ Consider Žižek’s now famous comments that Badiou is a modern “Hegel.”

⁵ Consider the impact of Badiou’s work on his former student Quentin Meillassoux, who has published an influential book of his own. See Quentin Meillassoux. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Contingency of Necessity*. (London, UK. Bloomsbury Academic, 2010), which starts with a euphoric Preface by Badiou.

⁶ As evidenced, for example, by the comparative popularity of his books on Sarkozy and history relative to *Being and Event* and his other dense metaphysical works.

⁷ This comes most to the fore in his critiques of “democratic materialism.” See Alain Badiou. *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II*, trans. Alberto Toscano. (London, UK. Continuum, 2009), 1

⁸ See Alain Badiou. *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran. (London: Continuum, 2008)

I find this to be quite inspiring. Unfortunately, I do not believe that Badiou ultimately succeeds in his goal. This is because Badiou does not offering sufficiently compelling meta-mathematical and epistemological reasons for why his system should be accepted over other, equally Platonic, alternatives. Badiou wants to have it both ways: he develops a Platonic philosophy, which is justified because the consequences of sophistic anti-philosophy have been blatantly unfortunate. But while this might be a prompt to abandon sophism, it is a great leap to go from this inclination to accepting the often asserted rather than argued for metaphysical architecture that he proposes.

This problem is also true in Badiou's politics. He is sharply critical of liberal democrats and conservatives, holding to the Communist hypothesis that we shall only be truly liberated from our "masters" when we show greater fidelity to the revolutionary Events to come. During these time periods, it will be possible to militantly commit to the truth of a new future. With this, we shall see a more authentic politics begin where individuals are no longer beholden to the vulgarizing tendencies of capital, and its modern ideology of democratic materialism. While there is again much to admire here, it does not strike us as particularly helpful for advancing any constructive left wing causes. Once one separates Badiou's political claims from its impressive but faulty metaphysical architecture, he comes across as a sharp critic of the contemporary era and the Left's now increasingly anachronistic alignment with identity politics. But in terms of what is to be done, we are left with little except promises of a messianic event to come where the forces of progress will inevitably have their day. This strikes me as altogether too prone to mysticism; indeed, it smacks of a type of Orthodox Marxism that was rightly criticized by many of the post-modern thinkers Badiou wants to reject. In the final substantive section, I offer a collection of reasons why Badiou's philosophy and politics requires substantive clarification if it is to be considered both comprehensive and intellectually coherent. Badiou or Badiouians should be more attentive to details of the sort I raise, and less enamoured with the prospects of grand theorizing.

BADIOU'S CRITICISMS OF POLITICAL THEORY AND POST-MODERN ANTI-PHILOSOPHY

Badiou's politics draw heavily on the metaphysical framework established in his more directly philosophical works, which we discussed extensively above. He understands politics to be one of the "conditions" which constitute human subjectivity, alongside love, art, and philosophy itself. To summarize quickly: for Badiou, politics occurs when we are confronted with a historical event, such as the French or Russian revolution, from which a new truth of social ordering emerges from the infinite multiplicity of

Being.⁹ As subject, human beings then have the equal chance of choosing fidelity to this new truth or rejecting it. Obviously, Badiou prefers that we embrace the former and its radical potential for transformation. As he nicely puts it in *Conditions*:

“...politics amounts to an immanent site of thought that disposes its nominations, its sites and its statements in accordance with the law of a specific fidelity to an event.”¹⁰

Given the complexity and interconnectedness of his work, unpacking what Badiou means by politics can be a formidable task. To help explicate by contrast, this section will highlight what Badiou's is *not* trying to achieve with his politics. The hope is that this will better indicate what makes his position unique, both because of its systematic connection to his metaphysics, and due to its own novelty as a philosophical account of (meta) politics.

Firstly, Badiou is deeply opposed to developing an explicit political theory of the type popular in the analytical tradition. He is deeply critical of philosophers who assume the stance of a “brutal and confused objectivity” when developing “ethical demands”¹¹ that are to be imposed on the world.¹²

⁹ See Alain Badiou. *Conditions*,

¹⁰ Badiou, *Conditions*, 163

¹¹ As we shall discuss later, this position strikes us as deeply confused. Much of it stems from Badiou's general phobia towards transcendental arguments of any type, including political theories that rely on constructive claims which emerge from simplifying heuristic devices. Unfortunately Badiou rarely provides any specific examples, though it is not difficult to surmise who he might be thinking of. Such theories are very common in analytical political theory. The most notable of would be John Rawls' theory of justice, though one could also cite Habermas' arguments for a dialogical ethics predicated on formulating the conditions for ideal speech situations, or Dworkin's arguments for the integrity of law as perceived by a superhuman Judge. See John Rawls. *A Theory of Justice: Revised Edition*. (Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1999), 221-227 and Jurgen Habermas. *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, ed. Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff. (Cambridge, MA. The MIT Press, 2000) and Ronald Dworkin. “Hard Cases” in *Taking Rights Seriously*. (Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press, 1977). However, Badiou never offers many specific arguments on why such reasoning is invalid. Much of it simply strikes us as undue prejudice against the analytical tradition borne out of a simplistic reading of what its political philosophers are trying to accomplish. Badiou simply seems to regard any transcendental theorizing, as is commonly deployed in the analytical tradition, as deficient because it is not derived from some deeper ontological truth. But he completely ignores that most analytical political philosophers are not ignorant of ontological problems. Indeed, many of them deliberately want to segregate political theory from more general philosophical questions to give it a greater analytical heft and to avoid controversies that aren't germane to the main orientation of the project. Perhaps this is inadvisable and political theorists would do better if they paid more attention to ontology. As we shall see below, he has reasons for adopting this position. But Badiou cannot simply declare that any other approach to political philosophy is wrongheaded and move on, especially when many of these figures have compelling reasons to adopt a contrary stance. Ontological fiat does not evade the problems of philosophical disagreement,

There are two reasons for this unusual stance. The first is that the practice of political theorizing runs against Badiou's ontological commitments. Badiou believes that traditional political theorists operate on the presumption that it must be possible to determine once and for all the truths that should order all social life. Plato is the classical example. But Badiou rejects this totalizing logic at the ontological level. As there is no singular point where multiplicity merges into oneness, there are no final truths about how the social world should be ordered. There are historical events which establish their own truths, and subjects who can choose to show fidelity to them or not.

The second reason Badiou rejects constructing a political theory is more explicitly related to his politics. He is committed to a radical project of egalitarian communism, where the state will gradually become untethered and the people will be emancipated from the shackles of their "masters" and the subservient intellectual cronies who vindicate their rule. Badiou does not think it is possible to stay committed to this project while developing a set of principles which are to order emancipated and equal subjects. To do so would be to arrogantly assume a privileged position denied to most people.¹³ As he puts it in *Metapolitics*:

"The trouble with most doctrines of justice is their will to define what is, followed by attempts to realize it. But justice, which is the philosophical name for the egalitarian maxim, cannot be defined. For equality is not an objective of action, it is an axiom. There is no politics bound to truth without the affirmation-an affirmation that can neither be confirmed nor guaranteed-of a universal capacity for political truth."¹⁴

Some of this rhetoric suggests that Badiou is a close to being a post-modern critic; someone who offers critiques of the contemporary social order but rejects the intellectual task of conceiving alternatives. And indeed, his work develops many trenchant criticisms of capitalism, the state, and the ideologies of the powerful. But Badiou rejects the post-modern position that the job of the philosopher is only to engage in these critical tasks. Indeed, he does not believe that post-modern critics can even be called philosophers in the strong sense. They are instead anti-philosophers

on this or any other issue. In the future, we may take up this problem more directly since it is important and connotes two distinctly different views on politics and philosophy. However, to deal with it in more depth here would be distracting.

¹² See Alain Badiou. *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker. (London: Verso, 2005), 11.

¹³ As we shall see later, he is not entirely faithful to this. At other points he can sometimes come across as quite dismissive of the idea that all individuals opinions should be considered, but for unique reasons.

¹⁴ See Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 99.

who believe that all reality is constituted by power relations, or “bodies and languages” fashioned by the world as he sometimes puts it.¹⁵ The political payoff of their project is what Badiou derisively terms “democratic materialism” which is oriented around the presumption that, since all truth claims are equally groundless, it is best to consider every viewpoint whatever their substantive content. As he puts it in *Logics of Worlds*:

“In order to validate the equation ‘existence=individual=body’ contemporary doxa must valiantly reduce humanity to an overstretched version of animality...Moreover, it is essentially a democratic materialism. That is because the contemporary consensus, in recognizing the plurality of languages, presupposes their juridical equality. Hence, the assimilation of humanity to animality culminates in the identification of the human animal with the diversity of its sub-species and the democratic rights that inhere in this diversity...Communities and cultures, colours and pigments, religions and clergies, uses and customs, disparate sexualities, public intimacies and the publicity of the intimate: everything and everyone deserves to be recognized and protected by the law.”¹⁶

Here, Badiou seems to tightly conflate the emergence of the post-modern mindset with our contemporary commitment to human rights projects and the liberal legalism that seems to imply.

This may strike many people as an unusual gesture, given the propensity of postmodern critics to be at the very least skeptical of human rights. But it is important to understand that Badiou’s reasoning here is quite precise. He sees both liberalism and post-modernism as branches of the same anti-philosophical tree-dedicated to protecting the rights of individuals to express their identities and viewpoints with as little intrusion as possible. This quite radical conclusion suggests that, in this respect at least, liberalism and post-modernism are alike at their core. Both traditions reject the idea that there could be ontological truths which transcends our individual bodies and languages and to which we should demonstrate some fidelity. And indeed, he would seem to be standing on some solid ground here. Modern liberal philosophy since at least Kant’s (anti) Copernican revolution¹⁷ has been skeptical that we can achieve an understanding of some transcendent truths. Since we are always bound by the limitations of our mind, we can never have unfiltered access to truth and goodness as

¹⁵ See Badiou. *Logics of Worlds*

¹⁶ See Badiou. *Logics of Worlds*, 2

¹⁷ This point about the anti-Copernican nature of Kant’s revolution is emphasized by Badiou’s student Meillasoux. Meillasoux highlights that, where Copernicus sought to invert anthropocentric cosmologies, Kant made the entirety of knowledge dependent on what can be experienced by human beings. See Meillasoux. *After Finitude*.

these things are “in themselves.” This skepticism about truth is why many liberal philosophers have tried to argue that we must respect the views of as many individuals as possible, since we can never be sure that our positions about what is true and good are beyond criticism. Indeed, some philosophers such as Rawls have gone so far as to call for a purely “political liberalism” detached from even the most basic metaphysical presumptions about truth and goodness “in themselves.”¹⁸ In this respect, liberalism seems to have many connections to post-modernism’s anti-philosophical critiques of foundationalism. While post-modern thinkers may speak more radically than modern liberals, according to Badiou both adopt more or less the same conclusions about truth and its relationship to politics.

BADIOU’S POLITICS OF THE EVENT

This brings my back to what makes Badiou’s politics unique in a more positive sense. While he does not want to develop a political theory which once and for all will determine what truths should be adopted in politics, he is also unwilling to accept the liberal and post-modern position that there can be no truths in politics, only bodies and languages. Badiou is able and willing to defend an argument that there are “truths” and that they should play a role in framing our political subjectivity. Indeed, he argues that truths, as they manifest on the sites of true historical events, are important to demonstrate the lies propagated by our “masters” in the state and amongst the capitalist class.¹⁹ When truths manifest in historical events, they demonstrate the void in the existence of what has come before and open a new horizon for genuine politics.

This is where Badiou’s arguments for the “communist hypothesis” come in, so it bears examining in more depth. Badiou has been criticized quite vehemently for his positive comments about Maoism, and for his more general sympathies towards to Marxist project. And indeed, there are certain anachronistic features of his work that we will highlight later. But it is important to understand where Badiou is coming from with his apparently unusual arguments. To Badiou, communism emerges as the truth of society when the powers that be can no longer totalize the movements of history within a univocal ideological framework. Put in his language more specifically, the Event reveals the partial groundlessness of a totalizing univocity through the appearance of a new truth which emerges from the multiplicity of being. Prior to the

¹⁸ See John Rawls. *Political Liberalism: With a New Introduction and the ‘Reply to Habermas.’* (New York, NY. Columbia University Press, 1993)

¹⁹ See Alain Badiou. *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott. (London, UK. Verso, 2012)

Event, the masters of the world ordered it according to this ideology to ensure that they remained atop the social hierarchy, and dismiss any attempts to remove them as fantasy. But the Event displays the lie of their attempt to totalize history within a singular truth wherein they will always be on top, and shatters the power dynamics of the calcified order. This is one respect in which Badiou's hypothesis is "communist." But there is another, and more positive sense of this as well. Not only does the Event demonstrate the incompleteness of the old social order, it grants individuals a unique opportunity to fashion themselves in a new way by seizing power and constructing a new society that will not be defined by the hierarchies of the old. In these contexts, all individuals who have been nothing have the chance to become all. Through the Event, all become equal again.²⁰

This also brings us to why Badiou characterizes his position alternately as "ethical" and "metapolitical." As mentioned earlier, Badiou does not want to provide a programme of theory for politics any more than he wants to concede all ground to the skeptic. Instead, he wants to link communism to the operations of being itself in all of its multiplicity. This very closely follows Althusser in giving an orthodox reading of Marxism; one that truly believes that the Event of revolution comes about due to the movements of material reality rather than the considered choices of revolutionary actors.²¹ But Badiou does break from Althusser in granting individuals some agency beyond their historical role within a false totality.²² When the Event occurs, individuals have the option of showing fidelity to ontologically emergent truths or rejecting them. Interestingly enough, Badiou sees this as an ethical act, but one with unique connotations for our identity. In many respects he follows existential thinkers in

²⁰ In some respect, Badiou's arguments here resembles Rousseau's idealization of the state of nature as a time before social hierarchies where all were equal. One way to understand Badiou might be as a figure who attempts to transplant these arguments into concrete historical imperatives: during the event, we are returned to the state of nature. Badiou seems to make some arguments to this effect when he claims that Rousseau "proves" that the general will cannot ever be represented, even by the sovereign state. As such, the state will always be subject to contestation because it will always be prone to hierarchical orderings. However, he does not draw a link to Rousseau's comments about the state of nature, even though much of it resembles Badiou's own, quasi-religious, interpretation of the event. See Badiou, *Being and Event*, 347. For more on the religious aspects of Badiou's thought, see the section below.

²¹ See Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar. *Reading Capital*. (London, UK. Verso Press, 2009)

²² Here Badiou's arguments can be helpfully compared to Althusser's much less individualistic reading of history. This is latent in all of his work, but probably is most clearly expressed via his criticisms of Sartrean humanism. See Louis Althusser. "Reply to John Lewis (Self Criticism)" in *On Ideology*. (London, UK. Verso Press, 2008), 65-114. Throughout his criticism of Lewis' Sartrean Marxism, Althusser is stridently insistent that Marx has little place for individual subjectivity and the humanism it seems to beget so naturally.

seeing the decision to show fidelity²³ to the truth of the Event as constitutive of our human subjectivity. In the moment of the Event, the subject is called upon to “give everything he is-his body, his abilities” to “enable the passing of a truth along its path.” The subject must then invent a new way of being and acting in the situation.²⁴

But, as mentioned, Badiou goes beyond existentialism in maintaining that, since the Event brings a new truth into the world that is not beholden to the dynamical laws that may have governed previous truths, the compulsion to invent new ways of being always has a radically egalitarian dimension. The Event reveals the laws of the old hierarchy, and clears a space for a new and more equal social ordering. Unfortunately, how this is to be carried out and what it would look like is not spelled out in any significant detail beyond the vague and rightly disturbing appeals to Maoism. But if one has followed Badiou so far, one would realize that providing such details would be besides the point at best, and counterproductive at worst. The Event stands for its own truth, not that which any given subject with an anterior motive wishes to ascribe to it.

These two sections have attempted to describe Badiou’s politics and draw some links to his metaphysics. I believe Badiou can be understood as evading both the temptations of analytical political theory and post-modern skepticism through his metaphysics. According to Badiou, the multiplicity of Being guarantees that the old social totality will break down, and a new one will emerge through subjects who show fidelity to the truth of this radical Event. In this way, he seeks to capture what is best in the classical Marxist (materialist) project as read through Althusser and others, while still leaving more room for subjectivity than orthodox Marxism would allow. This is a fine line to walk, and to his credit, Badiou often does so successfully. In many ways, his work resembles and in some places consciously emulates the equally dialectical work of Hegel. But in other respects, it remains somewhat deficient (including, appropriately enough, in its treatment of Hegelian type problems). In the final section, I will highlight some of the problems with Badiou’s political thought, in particular his treatment of subjectivity and its related approach to history. These flow organically from some of the deficiencies in his metaphysics that we also highlighted earlier in this paper.

²³ At times he uses the more overtly Kierkegaardian term of “faith” when describing our commitment to the truth of the event. See Soren Kierkegaard. *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Alastair Hannay. (London, UK. Penguin Books, 1986)

²⁴ See Alain Badiou. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward. (London, UK. Verso Press, 2012), 41-42

CRITICISM OF BADIOU'S ONTOLOGY

I will begin this section with a brief comment about a fairly minor problem, before moving on to the deeper issues underpinning Badiou's politics. This minor problem relates to the intersection between ethics and politics in his work. The problem is that the latter often subsumes the former. Badiou's ethics has an inherently political cast to it; there is very little in his work that pertains to proper action in the realm of everyday life. His focus is almost always on broad institutional questions concerning how the social form should be reorganized to engender a more equal and free society. There is nothing wrong with this per se, but it is unusual to imply²⁵ that it exhausts the content of ethics. For instance, even in a political society of the type envisioned by Badiou there would still be major ethical problems that cannot be easily resolved. Would it be right for individuals to have two kidneys when they could easily donate one in order to save a life? Should we abandon supporting philosophy and art if it can be positively demonstrated that there are more consequentially useful activities which benefit all?²⁶ Should individuals be required to abandon bad habits that form part of the tapestry of our identity and inculcate virtues that are socially useful, and indeed conducive to an egalitarian society?

The reason these more individualized ethical questions pertain to his politics is that they point to a fundamentally Kantian problem²⁷ about the relationship between ethical acts and freedom. Cast in that language, one might call it a tension between freedom and duty, which pertains both at the day to day level and at the level of a politics of fidelity. Badiou often seems to imply that the relationship between the two is that the Event constitutes its own imperatives, and that individuals are then free to accept or reject them as per their wish. But the tension does not just exist in Evental moments where we are called upon to make drastic decisions. Often there are more day to day issues which arise where we might feel compelled to put aside our individual orientation to act in a manner that seems more ethically robust. These choices may not be ones we'd wish to make, and may not even be reflective of one's individuality. Focusing exclusively on ethics as mostly a politics of fidelity to the Event may seem grander, but it ignores these more challenging tensions that we must deal with. But they may none the less be ethical. How a society would deal with these tensions is an

²⁵ I do not believe that Badiou ever makes the claim that his account entirely exhausts the content of ethics implied by his position, but he often writes as if it does.

²⁶ These are observations made by Peter Singer. See Peter Singer. *The Most Good You Can Do: How Effective Altruism is Changing Ideas About Living Ethically*. (New Haven, CN. Yale University Press, 2015)

²⁷ Here I follow Wood. See Allen W. Wood. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999)

important question that is largely unanswered in Badiou's work. It focuses too much on the conditions for what appears to be a more politically and ethically robust society without providing adequate details.

Badiou's focus on fidelity and the Event is not just a problem at this level. It reflects a deeper mystery that lies at the heart of his work. The most basic problem with Badiou's politics is deeply related to his ontology: its treatment of history. Generally speaking Badiou has been quite critical of Hegelian/Marxist type historicism, and the belief that it is possible to develop some formula for the "science of history." Instead, he calls history a "reservoir of proper names." History is a "symbolic fiction" which is represented to most people via the unifying force of a proper name.²⁸ Against this, the truth of an idea, for instance the idea of communism, must be advocated to push the individual against the constraints imposed by the powers that be. On this point his particular Communist sympathies deviate quite substantially from Althusser's, except in keeping its most unscientific dimensions. Indeed, much of his account of history echoes the most unusual features of Marxist messianism, but given a distinctive twist.

From this, it should be clear how and why Badiou believes that traditional Marxist accounts of history are problematic. In particular, he singles these accounts out for relying on a totalizing Hegelian logic, according to which the singular "meaning" of history appears in due course.²⁹ As indicated in the section above, he wishes to replace this Hegelianism with his own ontological framework where Being is not the movement of an immanent dialectic oriented towards a singular end. While his account of history is dialectical, it is distinct from the Marxist model in being open ended and ontologically incomplete. As we have seen, rather than move towards a singular end, the truth or untruth of a social system manifest through an Event that demands fidelity at the site of its appearance. The Event occurs because the multiplicity of Being manifests itself inevitably; no master or ideology can close off its possibility, even if they apply overwhelming power to prevent it. In these situations the truth becomes subjectivized in the form of an Idea, in particular the idea of emancipation through the establishment of a new egalitarian order and the destruction of the old hierarchy.

The Event has a quasi-religious significance for Badiou, a point echoed by the language of fidelity and faith he deploys to describe both our subjective orientation towards them and the site of their manifestation. While God will never intervene to devastate those who blaspheme against his word, the truth of the Event will overcome

²⁸ See Alain Badiou. *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran. (London, UK. Verso Press, 2009), 189.

²⁹ This point echoes why he felt the need to replace Hegel's logic with his own. See Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*

the hypocrisy of a given hierarchy and sweep away the modern Pharisee's who support it. To provide just one example, consider the rhetoric in Badiou's description of the Worker's Commune of 1871, which he takes as a paradigmatic Event:

“...If the inexistent aspect of a site must ultimately capture, in the order of appearing, a maximal intensity, it is only to the extent that this intensity henceforth takes the place of what has disappeared; its maximality is the subsisting mark, in the world, of the event itself. The ‘eternal’ existence of an inexistent consists in the trace of statement, in the world, of the evanescent event. The proclamations of the Commune, the first worker power in universal history, comprise a historic existent whose absoluteness manifests the coming to pass in the world of a wholly new ordering of its appearing, a mutation of its logic. The existence of an inexistent aspect is that by which, in the domain of appearing, the subversion of worldly appearing by subjacent being is played out. It is the logical marking of a paradox of being, an ontological chimera.”³⁰

This paragraph is saturated with quasi-Hegelian rhetoric, and often seems to delight in its embrace of paradox and contradiction. This strikes me as rather bizarre. It is one thing to bite occasional paradoxical bullet, but in his account of history Badiou often seems open to consuming an oncoming arsenal. Indeed, this paragraph alone begs for Marxist satire of the type so ably deployed in the master's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.³¹ Badiou's love of mystification and grandiosity is a bit of a weakness when he moves from the inevitably high minded realm of ontology into discussing the harder edged realities of real history. It obfuscates from what we take to be the more crucial issues at hand.

While Badiou's interpretation of history does have the virtue of avoiding pseudo-Hegelian monologism, he does not avoid the most crucial problem of ontological totalization. This is a key problem. Badiou believes that human history operates according to the logic of fundamental ontology, with the multiplicity of Being resulting in the destabilization of all human hierarchies etc. This may be the case, but Badiou never establishes why or how this is so in a theoretically robust way. When one carefully examines his extensive oeuvre, one sees that his arguments about history are mainly assertions whose tenability flows from accepting the underpinning framework. Put another way, Badiou simply assumes that human history operates according to the same laws of fundamental ontology; albeit with some conversions and adaptations to account for the existence of human subjects and to lead to conclusions about the

³⁰ See Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, 167-168.

³¹ See Karl Marx. “Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right.” In *Early Writings*, trans. (London, UK. Penguin Books, 1992)

stability of political regimes that are consonant with his own sympathies. This is a highly suspicious gesture, and not at all adequate to support the radical conclusions Badiou proposes as self-evident. Seen in this light, Badiou's theory of history and politics seems more like an extension of its author's preferences rather than a deeply considered framework which can be useful to those looking to realize social change.

To demonstrate by contrast, consider Marx's own account of what, following Althusser, we might call the philosophy of "dialectical materialism" and its related "science of history."³² It too can be accused of mysticism and obfuscation, particularly with regard to its more prescriptive dimensions. Marx's comments about what should replace liberal capitalism never went very far beyond his early and likely sarcastic remarks with Engel's in otherwise seminal works such as *The German Ideology*.

"For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic. This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now."³³

This lack of a clear template, even what Badiou would derisively call a "political theory" has often been held up as a virtue by thinkers such as Althusser who wish to stress the philosophical and scientific objectivity of "dialectical materialism" and the "science of history" respectively. This suggests that the immanent collapse of the liberal-capitalist order is inevitable, thus negating the requirement to in fact develop a substantial normative argument for why subjects who are capable of remaking history should choose to develop a new and better alternative to the status quo. It also means neglecting what Judith Butler might call the "psychic" life of power;³⁴ not just that

³² Althusser, Louis and Balibar, Etienne. *Reading Capital*. (London, UK. Verso Press, 2009)

³³ See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology: Includes Theses on Feuerbach and the Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*. (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998), 53

³⁴ See Judith Butler. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. (Stanford, CA. Stanford University Press, 1997)

consciousness plays a role in replicating materialist domination, but that consciousness itself plays a constitutive role in engendering the very existence of institutions and apparatuses of material oppression and ideological promulgation. Such criticisms have long been understood and accepted even by many Marxist thinkers such as David Harvey and Slavoj Žižek, who have pointed out the considerable problems with Marx's own mechanistic account of an inevitable communist future to come. As Žižek points out, invoking Lacanian criticisms of such a mechanistic materialism:

“For traditional Marxists, materialism means that ideology...is grounded in the extra-ideological material process of social (re)production (“being determined consciousness”); what they ignore is the proper material existence of ideology in the [ideological state apparatuses], in a complex institutional network of practices and rituals. However, Lacan here goes on step further than Althusser: there is a specific materiality of ideas themselves, immanent to the “ideal” symbolic order, insofar as this order cannot be reduced to (an expression or) meaning but functions as a “meaningless” machine, the machine that is the big Other beyond any concrete materialization in institutions and material practices.”³⁵

These problems indicate not just the limitations of the specifically materialist philosophical outlook unique to Marxism, but why it remains important to delve into the murkier realm of “political theory” whether one wishes to or not. This is why projects like Cohen's remain a useful addendum to Marx's; since they develop a convincing and thorough argument not just that liberal capitalism may well end, but give us some useful clues about the more egalitarian society which may replace it.³⁶

But, with these exceptions and qualifications, few would accuse Marx of being unduly prone to simply asserting the truth of his theory of history from a certain ontological presumptions. Indeed, as Althusser himself points out, the key transition in Marx's thought is from his more speculative “young” phase to the more mature “scientific” phase of his adulthood.³⁷ In this era, far from relying on the self-evident nature of dialectical materialism, Marx grounded his analysis in substantial empirical facts and an abundance of helpful analogies with the most relevant science of his day.³⁸ He was clearly keen to show how dialectical materialism wasn't just a philosophical ground; it was a framework for analysis that could be assessed against other salient

³⁵ See Slavoj Žižek. *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. (London, UK: Verso Books, 2014), 55

³⁶ See G.A Cohen. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001)

³⁷ See Louis Althusser. *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster. (London, UK: Verso Press, 2006)

³⁸ See Karl Marx. *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes. (London, UK: Penguin Press, 1990). Our more technical reading of the Marxist tradition is inspired by Fine and Saad-Filho. See Ben Fine and Alfredo Saad-Filho. *Marx's Capital: Fifth Edition*. (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2006)

facts and issues.³⁹

This is part of the features that gives the Marxist approach its longevity and power, not to mention is appeal to thinkers as different as G.A Cohen and Slavoj Zizek.⁴⁰ As David Harvey has consistently noted, Marx's dialectical materialism was in no sense a dogmatic epistemological standpoint predicated on a strict ontology. Materialist dialectics, both at an epistemological and an ontological level, is fundamentally relational. It posits that our perception of independently existent objects and subjects emerge as part of a deeper ontological process which we must come to grasp more reflectively. It is this process that is the deepest level of reality, and because it is continuously in flux we must always remain cognizant of how the objects and subjects which appear at the level of perception possess a largely contingent existence. In this respect Marxist dialectics has a great deal in common with the process oriented philosophies of figures like Whitehead.⁴¹ But, and this is key, understood properly Marxism is capable of explaining them in a manner that eschews mystical appeals to some metaphysical vitalistic force, theology, or ideational concepts such as the Absolute.

By contrast, Badiou does not even feel it is necessary to describe how his mathematical ontology links up with the claims of contemporary physics.⁴² This is a problem when analyzed just at the metaphysical level; when applied to a subject matter even more remote like human history it becomes a tremendous gap. And this this gap is not just a theoretical problem which can be hashed out in the future, especially for a thinker like Badiou. The analytical political theorists and the democratic materialists whom he criticizes could get away with a project where the link between their metaphysics and their political commitments were tenuous. This is because no part of their project is intended to rely so heavily on the others; Rawls' project can be saved from its Kantian underpinnings, much like a great deal of Derrida's work on language can be sustained even if one rejects his work on ethics. However Badiou wants to have

³⁹ On this methodological point, see Karl Marx. *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus. (Middlesex, UK. Pelican Books, 1973), 100-108.

⁴⁰ See G.A Cohen. *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*. (Princeton, NJ. Princeton University Press, 2001) and Slavoj Zizek. *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. (London, UK. Verso, Press. 2012)

⁴¹ My reading of the process oriented dimensions of Marxism is largely inspired by Harvey. See David Harvey. *Justice, Nature, and the Geography of Difference*. (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1996)

⁴² Take his account of an object, as a collection of multiple elements indexed under a name. All the atomic elements of appearing referred to by this multiple are real in their manifestation in the world as objects. See Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 220-221. It is astounding that nowhere does he discuss the problems with this model posed by quantum mechanics, for example the issue of non-localizability.

it every way; to give an ontological account of reality that links seamlessly to a negative account of history which in turn births certain political commitments. Such huge ambitions would require that clear links be established every step of the way. For instance, it is not clear on his account why the operations of human history should seamlessly follow the same logic as Being qua Being. As has well been noted, human societies and histories operate according to patterns which cannot necessarily be explained by appeal to some deeper set of ontological laws. Indeed, the same is true even in the workings of biological entities. Badiou attempts to account for this through his transcendental logic and account of subjectivity. But this is never entirely convincing since the ontology is always determinative in the last instance. This raises an epistemic question and an ontological question. Firstly, why should we take the laws of fundamental ontology to explain what goes on at different levels of reality? Isn't it possible that different epistemic frameworks might be required?⁴³

And secondly, it is not clear why fundamental ontology should exhaust all ontological inquiries. Here, Badiou's Platonism seems excessively foundationalist and even deterministic. He believes that the ontological basis of reality is mathematical, and that this basis is determinative of reality up to the Event, where the subject is constituted and some form of agency becomes possible. However, even if he is correct that mathematics is at the fundamental root of any acceptable ontology, this needn't be interpreted in such a strong foundationalist manner. Indeed, is it possible that Badiou's monological interest in Being qua Being might distract from an even more radical possibility; that time itself changes the operation of ontological laws, and that history in the broadest (physical) sense is therefore more decisive than fundamental ontology?⁴⁴ This is the argument of figures like Roberto Unger and Lee Smolin, who have a more nuanced approach to mathematics and ontology than that found in Badiou. Their work also demonstrates the strengths of appealing to physics and developments in the sciences when trying to develop a thorough account of reality that

⁴³ Badiou has long disdained epistemological issues, often to his detriment. For instance, it has led to an almost total lack of engagement with analytical thinkers involved in the same issues he is concerned with. To give just one example, Saul Kripke has long dealt with many of the same issues of contingency and necessity as Badiou, but also takes epistemology as seriously as metaphysics. See Saul Kripke. *Naming and Necessity*. (Malden, MA. Blackwell Publishing, 1981). For Badiou's dismissive comments on epistemological issues see Alain Badiou with Gilles Haeri. *In Praise of Mathematics*, trans. Susan Spitzer. (Cambridge, UK. Polity Press, 2016), 13-14.

⁴⁴ This fascinating possibility has been raised recently by Roberto Unger and Lee Smolin. Interestingly, there are considerable parallels between at least Unger and Smolin. Both are left wing thinkers of great ambition who frequently delve into more basic philosophical problems. See Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin. *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*. (Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 2015)

links mathematics, materialism, and politics together. In their book *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time* Unger and Smolin argue persuasively that new discoveries about the nature of quantum theory suggest that even the laws of mathematics, while necessary to understanding nature, may themselves be contingent and develop through time.⁴⁵ Their position echoes the opinions of earlier thinkers like Deleuze and Bergson, who also emphasized the importance of time and change when understanding ontology and mathematics. It also meshes more consistently with process oriented ontologies, such as Marx's discussed above. As Unger put it in his companion paper "A Mystery Demystified":

"The distinctiveness of the mathematical perspective -- its evisceration of particularity and its suppression of time -- helps explain the power of mathematics to illuminate a universe in which time holds sway and particularity is everywhere. This power, nevertheless, perpetually subjects us to a twofold risk. The first risk is to mistake the mathematical representation of a slice of the one real world -- the slice that has to do with bundles of relations and with structured wholes -- for privileged, indubitable insight into a separate, nature-transcending realm of mathematical truths. There is no such realm, any more than there is a multitude of unobservable universes (now commonly called the multiverse) whose existence we postulate only because they fill the otherwise empty boxes of a mathematical conception, disguised as a physical theory. The second risk is that we allow ourselves to be lulled by the effectiveness and beauty of our mathematical propositions into the belief that nature shares in their timelessness. It would do so, most convincingly, by operating under the force of eternal laws and symmetries. Such regularities achieve adequate expression only when they can be represented mathematically. Their susceptibility to mathematical representation confirms, according to this illusion, their claim to participate in the freedom of mathematics from time. It does not. To believe that it does is to spoil the gift of mathematics to physics."⁴⁶

CONSEQUENCES FOR BADIOU'S POLITICS

I raise these deeper ontological questions not to suggest that they knock down Badiou's politics decisively. Again, I am largely sympathetic to much of his project. But with regard to his politics, the more useful aspects of his thought strike me as his critical comments on both political philosophy and the skepticism of democratic materialism.

⁴⁵ See Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin. *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*. (Cambridge, UK. Cambridge University Press, 2015)

⁴⁶ See Roberto Mangabeira Unger. "A Mystery Demystified: The Connection Between Mathematics and Physics" <http://robertounger.com/>, /pdfs/MATHEMATICS_AND_PHYSICS1.pdf, at 1

His own positive contributions seem highly speculative, and don't really follow from one another. At best they are highly conjectural, at worse they seem to fall back into the kind of mysticism that Marx's, and for that matter Unger and Smolin's, more process oriented ontologies were supposed to rescue us from.

More importantly, its foundationalist privileging of fundamental ontology ignores the possibility that changes at a higher level, perhaps spurred by forward thinking human action, might be more epistemically and ontologically important for human history. This includes the possibility that human action and constructive planning might be more crucial for the transformation of social hierarchies than waiting for the inevitable dramas of Being to save us. This is the key innovation of thinkers like Žižek and Unger, who provide a more substantial account of human agency than what is found in Badiou's work. Žižek's criticisms of "traditional" Marxism's mechanistic thinking discussed above applies with even greater force to Badiou's own project. He seems to understand his mathematical ontology as constitutive of reality prior to the emergence of a transformative Event. Badiou's foundationalism has a Euclidean or Pythagorean quality to it, in that the character of reality, including for the subject, is set until there is an Evental window for genuine transformation. This is an unusual position, combining the determinism of a mathematical formula to ontology with a mysticism which engenders a few rare historical opportunities for the constitutions of subjects who are capable of making real and concrete choices about the political contexts they will inhabit.

This combination of mathematical foundationalism on the one hand and transformative Events on the other is both too rigid too mystical to address our political needs in the present day. I hold that "men make their own history,"⁴⁷ and while they might do so under certain contexts, it is better to put our faith in well-conceived strategy, normative and perspective argumentation, and palatable egalitarian principles than in the possibility of a transformative Event to come. The latter seems too mystical, too foundationalist, and too enamoured with mathematical ontology while being divorced from humanity and the ongoing process of its history.

This is where Badiou's approach to politics becomes overly assertive, and not sufficiently grounded. Trying to derive a specific political program from ontology, as has commonly been the case in Continental thought, is a somewhat suspicious activity. Most notably, it ignores many meta-ethical problems concerning how to make the move from discussing Being-qua-Being, to discussing ethics, and indeed political ethics,

⁴⁷ See Karl Marx. *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, trans. (New York, NY. International Publishers, 2008)

as a set of reason giving imperatives for undertaking certain actions.⁴⁸ What I mean by this is that there seems to be something in the structure of ethical thought which gives the imperatives of ethics a quasi-independence from the world around them. One might call this an iteration of the old is/ought problem. The natural world as it exists, as Being qua Being, can be dissected using the tools of philosophy and metaphysics. But it is not clear in what sense it provides a set of reason giving imperatives for actions which human beings should take. Badiou seems to think that it does, since the structure of Being begets the Event. But as mentioned before, this strikes me as rather mysterious. Why should human beings feel compelled to accept this structure as exhaustively conducive of ethics? Why should they not feel more involved in the constitution and consideration of ethics on a day to day basis. And indeed, to bring it back to the problem highlighted at the beginning of this section, what about more everyday problems which are not captured by the rather grand metaphysical account?

There is no space in this article to deal with these issues more extensively. I raise them not because Badiouian answers cannot be given, but because I feel that they haven't been. This poses a significant problem to his account of politics. To put it very simply, it is not clear why the structure of Being should also provide some structure to the nature of ethical and political thought. It seems clear that there must be some relation in the ultimate sense, since Being is the ultimate condition for the emergence of any ethics and politics at all. But the nature of this relationship may not be as straightforward as a simple throughline from Being, to Event, to fidelity, to freedom and equality. For Badiou's system to be successful, he or one of his disciples should be more attentive to fine details and less focused on broad theorizing.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to present a sympathetic but critical treatment of Badiou's politics, and draw some helpful connections to his metaphysics and broader philosophy. I have suggested that the largely critical dimension of his politics is helpful and even inspiring. I agree wholeheartedly that we should move beyond democratic materialism and its limitations and embrace a more ambitious program for philosophy such as the one Badiou himself attempts to develop. I then go on to argue that Badiou's own philosophy and politics has many insights of great interest. Unfortunately it also falls victim to a few limitations and questions which Badiou or Badiouians would need to answer if it is to be a comprehensive and intellectually complete philosophy.

⁴⁸ This problem is related to, but distinct from, the issue raised at the beginning of this section about the tension between freedom and ethics.

I will end by providing a few prescriptions of my own. I believe that there is much we can learn from Badiou's thought when trying to conceive a more progressive politics and an affiliated ontology. As mentioned, the critical arguments he directs against democratic materialism and its skepticism are exceptionally helpful. We should be less afraid of offering ambitious arguments about the politics and reality, and bolder in our speculations. Here Badiou's work, whatever the merits of its substantive points, is an inspiration and an example to follow in the future. In other words, we should draw a great deal of inspiration from Badiou's philosophical ambition while at least partially leaving behind the metaphysical baggage his system brings with it.

And this is what I would like to end on. I believe that we should follow the political thinking of dialectical philosophers such as Marx, Harvey, and Žižek, and combine their work with the more robust physical and mathematical ontological frameworks provided by authors like Roberto Unger and Lee Smolin. In tandem, these authors can provide a way of understanding reality as an ontological process wherein contingent objects and subjects emerge throughout time. This emergence is not a mystical event, but something that can be understood by developing a sufficiently robust philosophical understanding of the process and tying it to the most cutting edge empirical research into the nature of time and mathematics. Finally, we can use this as a basis for developing a more robust conception of agency, and an affiliated account of what an egalitarian politics would look like. Such a conception would not lean so heavily on the possibility of historical Events mechanistically emerging to enable broad social transformation. Instead it would provide a guide for how we should undertake more concrete actions in a future which remains continuously open to intervention and individual transformation. In a future paper, I hope to sketch all this out in considerably more detail.

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