

Inquiry into the Truth of Communism

MARC JAMES LÉGER

Bruno Bosteels. *Badiou and Politics*. Duke University Press, 2011. 436 pp.

Tom Eyers begins his review of Bruno Bosteels' *Badiou and Politics* by addressing the relevance of critical theory to the current political conjuncture in which the 'Arab Spring' of 2011, the anti-austerity demonstrations in Europe, and the Occupy movements have inaugurated a new era of revolt. I would be remiss if I did not make a similar observation concerning the relevance of Bosteels' book on Badiou to the Quebec "Maple Spring" (*Printemps Érablé*), which, beginning in February 2012, pitted the striking student assemblies against the provincial government's proposed 75-82 per cent tuition increase. Before getting to this, however, and even before addressing *Badiou and Politics* more directly, I want to emphasize that the question that is of primary concern here is the contemporary relevance of communism. One could gain a little perspective on *Badiou and Politics* through a consideration of Bosteels' *The Actuality of Communism*, which was published by Verso in 2011. The purpose of the latter is not only to assist the cross-generational transmission of the ideology of communism in a world that is weary of past disasters (AC 2011: 6), but to also consider communism as the name attributed to an emancipated future (AC 2011: 9). As part of this, Bosteels wonders if one should embrace the idea of communism as the art of the impossible—in the case of Badiou, as an ethics of courage and fidelity, and in the case of Slavoj Žižek, as the political variant of not giving way on one's desire. Can there be a unified front, he asks, beyond the multiple disagreements of this speculative left? In advance of *Badiou and Politics*, therefore, *The Actuality of Communism* lets us know that Bosteels' overarching purpose is a dialectic "between the actuality of communism and the attraction of so-called speculative leftism" (21). If Badiou's ultimate goal is to help bring into being a new modality of existence, then Bosteels' purpose is to take an extra step beyond philosophy and to consider how it is that politics thinks inside of Badiou's periodizing of the communist hypothesis.

Badiou and Politics is based on the intuition that Badiou's 1982 book, *Theory of the Subject*, as well as some of his earlier writings, such as *Théorie de la contradiction* (1974) and *De l'idéologie* (with François Balmès, 1976), are necessary for a proper appreciation of his later major works, *Being and Event* (1988) and *Logics of Worlds* (2006). The reason for this emphasis, according to Bosteels, is the tendency in the

reception of Badiou's work to consider his theory of the event to be unduly metaphysical and doctrinaire. Bosteels' overall argument, in contrast, is that there is an underlying continuity between the early and later writings that favours dialectical materialism, a continuity that may not be apparent to readers of *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989) and *Ethics* (1993), but which is evident in *Logics of Worlds*. Bosteels makes no apologies for his relative ineptitude regarding Badiou's unprecedented association of ontology with mathematics since, in his estimation, outside of being, the role of math is negligible (xviii). This assertion, I would argue, is hardly irrelevant to those of us who, unlike Bosteels, are more directly invested in the work of Žižek. Nevertheless, despite Bosteels' assertion, *Badiou and Politics* does offer cultural and social theory some exciting possibilities for thinking about the interconnections between social and subject formation and for considering the terms in which artistic practice might be conceived alongside politics as the central truth procedure in Badiou's work.

Bosteels argues that Badiou's thinking is dialectical primarily because it makes connections between being and event, between being as a science of multiplicity and event as the basis of a truth procedure. The significance of structural change is not what happens, not what we can know in terms of reality, but what is new in the situation. Being and event are not external to one another, but articulated through the impasse of being itself (7). What is it, a dialectician might wonder, that closes the gap between subject and object? Badiou's metapolitics, which resists all forms of representational politics, opposes politics (or culture) to economic base. Politics must not be considered against an eternally fixed notion of either capitalism or discourse. Dialectics, Bosteels argues, allows us to conceive of politics in terms of void and excess rather than totalization and negation (11). What's important here is the manner in which politics (culture) becomes thinkable, not as essence, but as distinct from political (aesthetic) philosophy. The truth procedures of politics, art, science and love cannot be subordinated to philosophy. In this regard, Bosteels states that the subject is "a fragment of the sustained enquiry into the consequences of an event for a possible universal truth" (25). From this we derive the simple understanding that not everything is political, and by the same token, not everything is of aesthetic significance. Politics is thus an art of the impossible that favours a truth that is universally the same for all, an art that can organize a generic equality that could be named communism.

The six principal chapters in *Badiou and Politics*, minus the last two digressive chapters on potentiality and radical democracy, are rich in theoretical concerns that are often taken as *passéiste*, sections that demonstrate how Badiou has made a consistent effort to preserve a dialectical materialist outlook. After establishing Badiou's debts to Althusser and Lacan, from the construction of a philosophy that provides schemas with which we can overcome contradictions (in other words, Theory) to a theory of the subject that goes beyond ideological interpellation (a subject that responds to and

displaces its own structural placement), Bosteels elaborates the primacy of the real, which in Badiou can become the site of a newly constituted truth. Badiou's example of a new social truth is Aeschylus' *Orestes*, in which, in contrast to Sophocles' *Antigone*, anxiety and sacrificial logic are replaced by courage and justice, leading to the composition of a new order. Badiou's preference for Aeschylus provides an example of the shift from the algebraic to the topological, the shift from the real of the vanishing to the real of the knot, which is the recognition of a subjectivity that is conditioned by truth (87). This figure of unheard-of-justice is then presented by Bosteels as the Maoist basis for Badiou's *Theory of the Subject*. Bosteels takes great pleasure in presenting us "his" Badiou, who is the Badiou for whom fidelity to May '68 derives from the French Maoist period of 1966 to 1976. The inquiry into the truth procedure, which for any cultural theorist is a challenge on the highest order (one thinks of the significance of the Russian artistic *avant-gardes* in relation to the historical mission of the Bolshevik revolution), is defined in terms of a Maoist investigation (*enquête*) into the dialectic between truth and knowledge, a report on knowledge and an analysis of the concrete situation (112). The Maoist Badiou has little use for the good moral conscience of the Beautiful Soul, for left-wing populism, Third-Worldism, or for identity struggles that vacillate between authoritarianism and anarchy. Badiou's education in the Union of Communists of France Marxist-Leninist (UCFML) led him to found L'Organisation Politique, a new type of party that does not merely propagate the reality of the party. This post-Maoist suspension of the party-form, Bosteels tells us, works to grasp the laws of politics rather than leading the working class in a revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society (127). What is significant here is that the organizational form remains necessary in Badiou's politics for anything that wishes to be more than a short-lived uprising.

This juncture in Bosteels' book brings me to the events of the "Maple Spring," which changed dramatically around May 18, 2012, when the Quebec provincial government under Jean Charest proposed the draconian "law 78," which severely curtailed people's rights of assembly and free speech and sought to prevent the continuation of the strike in the autumn of 2012. At that stage, Quebec citizens vehemently displayed their indignation by spontaneously assembling "casserole" demonstrations, bringing the student strike closer to more a generalized social strike.¹ The upshot of this mass involvement tilted the political process in the direction of electoral politics. In response to the student uprisings, the Parti Québécois (Quebec's separatist par-

¹ For critical writings on the "Maple Spring," see "Out of the Mouth of 'Casseroles' I and II" in *Wi:journal of mobile media* (Spring 2012); "Theorizing the printemps érable" supplement in *Theory & Event* 15:3 (2012); as well as Marc James Léger, "The Québec Maple Spring, the Red Square and After," (October 2012) at eipcp.net/n/1350583322.

ty and traditionally the Liberal government's political opposition on the provincial stage) appeared to many as an absolutely confusing and often contradictory choice: sometimes supportive of the students, sometimes associated with Quebec nationalism and separatism, and sometimes perceived as no less neoliberal in social policy than the Liberals. In an interview that was published in the newspaper *Le Devoir* on June 11, 2012, Badiou celebrated not only the particular form of the Quebec student resistance to tuition hikes but also the more general revolt of subjectivity against the corporate paradigm of free markets. He warned against independence movements, however, stating that in the last two to three decades, both the explosion of national identities as well as their destruction have proven to be negative phenomena. "I would not be in favour of the separation of Québec," he wrote. "I'm not convinced that the world making of the Québec people requires a state-led separation" (Gauvin 2012).

The terms of Badiou's politics in this interview are somewhat obscure. They could be more readily elucidated, as it happens, by the discussion that is provided in Appendix 2 of Bosteels' book, which is an interview with Badiou conducted by Peter Hallward and Bosteels in Paris on July 2, 2002. Badiou begins with the prevailing opinion that the political project of the left has been associated with totalitarianism, with communism as crime. Against this, Badiou proposes that the twentieth century was marked by the passion for the real, a will to transform the world, including the state and its police functions, according to a new formalization. Badiou accepts that in this regard the Cultural Revolution succeeded in mobilizing the masses, but failed by turning into anarchic violence and by preserving the party-state framework. Maoism, however, was correct in maintaining a dialectical relationship between the local and the global, in managing to preserve a place through subtraction rather than insurrection, confrontation or antagonism—in other words, by recognizing that the contradictions were not only between the people and their enemy, but in the midst of the people themselves (327).

Badiou goes on in the interview to reflect on anti-globalization demonstrations, which he considers insurrectional. Such movements, as advocated by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, for example, are considered by Badiou to be forms of adaptation to domination and not the genuine constitution of independent political spaces based on axiomatic stability (329-30). The anti-globalization movement, he says, is nothing but the "wild operator" of capitalist globalization (336). The horizontality, transversality and non-organizational aspects of the "multitudes" repeat the "very ordinary performances from the well-worn repertoire of petit-bourgeois mass movements" (337) and avoid all forms of discipline. The multitudes operate according to the terms of diffuse networks of power rather than according to differentiated statements that can concentrate the political rupture. The task of philosophy, therefore, is to separate politics from such forms of ideology as have become the stock in trade

of contemporary activism. Badiou continues his interview with a clarification on the links between contemporary nihilism and the democratic form of struggle. He suggests that contemporary artists who are attempting to move beyond postmodernism are also abandoning the politico-subjective configuration of democratic materialism, which recognizes no truths, only bodies and languages.

Bosteels' Badiou is the Badiou that would trouble the way in which Lacan responded to the revolutionary aspirations of the students by stating that what they are looking for is a master. For Badiou, the real, as the point of the impossible that structures the symbolic order, must not vanish into its effects, but must instead displace and transform the place of the lack, sustaining the elaboration of new truths. In this respect, the communism of the speculative left is more than an ideal. However, insofar as the Maoist theorist sees the revolt of the masses as typically appropriated by dominant forces, or by a faction becoming dominant, Bosteels asks that we supplement Badiou's work with a critique of political economy and a consideration of those emancipatory movements that relied on the guiding principles of Marxism. Today's leftist is typically caught between the masses of civil society and the coercive machinery of the state. Against a pure leftist reason, Bosteels champions Badiou's dialectical rethinking of class, the party and political organization. In turn, against the negative tendency of Badiou's speculative leftism, he calls for factions on the left to go beyond polemics and to build a common front.

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Marc James Léger is an artist, writer and educator living in Montreal. He has published essays in critical cultural theory in such places as *Art Journal*, *Etc*, *Fuse*, *Parachute*, *Third Text* and *Journal of Aesthetics and Protest*. He is editor of *Culture and Contestation in the New Century* and author of *Brave New Avant Garde: Essays on Contemporary Art and Politics*.