

# A Logical Revolt

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Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*. Trans. Bruno Bosteels. Verso, 2012. 98pp.

*Philosophy for Militants* comprises three essays on the interanimation of politics and philosophy, plus a brief interview with Badiou, tacked on as an appendix, about the student protests in Québec in 2012. It originally appeared in French as *La relation énigmatique entre philosophie et politique*, a title retained here only for the first, longest, and most foundational piece, in which Badiou defends both the autonomy of politics, conceived principally as a domain of truth, and philosophy's role in its creative innovations. This is followed by "The Figure of the Soldier", a meditation on valor and self-overcoming. "Politics as Nonexpressive Dialectics" extends the track of the first essay and links it with related paths in Badiou's work, including his use of certain results in set theory to model and clarify the conditions of political invention.

In the liberal tradition, political philosophy is a pragmatic or applied branch of moral theory. It is treated as primordial to discussions of institutional design, social action, the distribution of power and resources, how authority is to be constituted and legitimated, and so on, discussions that compose the essence of politics. The resulting decisions are political judgments, and philosophy's role is to define, formulate, and justify them. That this conception relies on a disastrously naïve and unrealistic model of politics is well-established.<sup>1</sup> That it also deforms and betrays the nature of philosophy is what Badiou sets out to show. In his vision, what is truly primordial is the event, that unpredictable rupture in the order of a situation that must be nominated as something radically new, proclaimed as unrepresentable from within the situation's current coordinates of meaning, and therefore made capable, if the subjects issuing such a proclamation faithfully construct its consequences, of changing existence. An event is political if its truth pertains to all and is available to all; if its type of equality exhibits, even in necessarily limited situations, the infinite multiplicity of human arrangements; if it exposes the repressive power of the State by interrupting that power, revealing and measuring its excessive, supererogatory dimension. Canonical events would include the Haitian Revolution of 1791, the Paris Commune of 1871, and the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the 1960s.

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<sup>1</sup> For a precisely argued treatment of this problem, especially as it concerns the legacies of Kant and Rawls, see Raymond Geuss's *Philosophy and Real Politics*.

What binds philosophy to this process? Here we find the “enigma” of Badiou’s original title. For Badiou, what politics is and means will be both autonomous with respect to philosophy and yet dependent on the work of thought, the conceptual production of truths. While philosophers cannot establish in advance the legitimate goals of political action—these are donated, as it were, by the event—they can, as subjects to the event, propose “a great new normative division, which inverts an established intellectual order and promotes new values beyond the commonly accepted ones” (13), thereby dividing, in the classical idiom that marks Badiou as a Platonist, *doxa* from *aletheia*. Events make truths, philosophy makes them speak. It breaks with the old regime of understanding by formalizing those newly veridical norms that we cannot reduce, repress, or ignore. To bear witness to eventual truth is to resist the “dissolution of philosophy into cultural relativism” (30) and to uphold the universality of philosophy, its democratic indifference to the position or identity of its speakers. The formal equality of minds is, for Badiou, internally connected to both the universal validity of logical rules and the exigencies of radical action: “if justice is the philosophical name of politics as truth of the collective, then justice is more important than freedom” (30). Any situation in which the equality of intelligences is not materially realized is unjust, and any society that elevates the interests of particular individuals over universal political truths is to be overthrown. This is where democracy comes in. Badiou identifies it with philosophy’s indifference to identitarian particulars, but it is also, in another sense, the name we give to both popular political mobilization and one configuration of the State’s structure. It can be a powerful instrument for reaching political truth, but is not the truth of politics as such. Badiou has his own name for a hypothetical space in which the formal indifference of truth is unified with the reality of mass political action, in which the philosophical equality of argument and discourse derives from and reinforces a just, virtuous politics: communism. “In this sense, all emancipatory politics contains for philosophy...the watchword that brings about the actuality of universality—namely: if all are together, then all are communists! And if all are communists, then all are philosophers!” (38)

Much of the preceding will be more intelligible to readers familiar with the radical ontology developed in Badiou’s major theoretical works, in which being is modeled mathematically, in set-theoretic terms, yet in such a way that its truths emerge through aleatory, decisionist, near-existential processes of subjective commitment. Fidelity is basic to these processes. One function of *Philosophy for Militants* is to expand on the meaning of fidelity in the political domain. What does it look like? In “The Figure of the Soldier”, Badiou calls it a form of heroism, the struggle to win local battles against inhuman regressions. It is self-transcendent loyalty, “the luminous appearance, in a concrete situation, of something that assumes its humanity beyond the natural limits of the human animal” (42). The essay explores the parlous state of political heroism today, when we appear trapped between the dead ends of religious

sacrifice and nihilistic exhaustion, or the evasion of heroism as such. In order to see whether there remains any creative potential for new forms of heroism we must first examine the heroic figures of our older political imaginary. As is clear from Badiou's list of canonical political events, the period from 1789 to 1976 should be regarded as an era of revolutions, in which the archaic image of the warrior was replaced by that of the soldier, a hero whose fidelity to the secular political body was measured by his (and in Badiou's retrospective accounting, the soldier is always male) brave and nameless death. His monuments enshrined a figure with no given identity, since he was both every citizen and the collective citizenry's guarantor of an eternal future: the flame at his grave was meant to burn forever. Badiou analyzes the lyrical resonance of this image in poems by GM Hopkins and Wallace Stevens. These readings conclude with the idea that the soldier was paradigmatic on account of his having fused two principles into a single image of human possibility: that truths can be forged on behalf of everyone, indifferently, in the here and now, and that they thereby belong to history and not to some sacred eternal order. But the living world of this figure is past; the revolutionary sequence has ended. War is now a repulsive scandal, a vast and meaningless homicide. Badiou therefore insists that "we must create new symbolic forms for our collective actions" (58), proper to whatever truths will come to have shaped, through those actions, our historical moment.

What does it mean to say that the era of revolutions is over? Collective emancipation no longer assumes its real form under some proper name—that of Lenin or Mao, for example. In the past, mass rebellion expressed objective class antagonisms, classes expressed their quiddity through parties led by individuals, and the name of the leader expressed therefore "the totality of the political process in its becoming" (62). It is this expressive dimension that has been consumed or emptied, historically speaking. The political dialectic in which a particular, exceptional event can embody a truth that is universal in its prescription, and in the address and legibility of its postulate, must now refuse its coverage by a proper name. Badiou argues for this refusal in "Politics as Nonexpressive Dialectics". Revolutionary action is no longer defined by its disclosure of objective contradictions—of some already existing reality—but by its disjunction or severance from reality in pursuit of the radically new, the currently nameless. Only such creative natality can restructure the political domain. Badiou diagnoses our current conjuncture as built—at least ideologically—around the opposition between liberalism's law and radicalism's desire, a relation that must itself be superseded by any properly generic political truth. Such a truth would, in its evasion of existing descriptions, in its separation from both law's dominion and "the dictatorship of normal desires" (74), rest on some magnificent, inspiring fiction. About this fiction Badiou can, of course, say very little. What he can do is model the process of natality in the language of set theory. The essay contains an intricately convoluted little riff on constructible and non-constructible sets. More precisely, Badiou is interested

here in the passage from a universe governed by the axiom of constructibility—a figure, here, for a meta-law, under which every situation can always already be named—to one where an unclassifiable set can be brought into being through an operation that is internal to set theory’s logic of consistency and yet, at the same time, the result of a pure or non-derived decision. The whole thing is pretty complicated, and what Badiou presents is more of a sketch of how some radical new situation can be ontologically grounded than a patient demonstration or formalized argument. For that one needs to consult Badiou’s major theoretical works.<sup>2</sup>

Such is *Philosophy for Militants*. Its usefulness will largely depend on the reader’s familiarity with and sympathy for Badiou’s project as a whole, although his caustic and haunting insights into the present order carry their own independent value. While any serious criticism of the main positions laid out in these essays should really be targeted at *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, where the author’s theoretical armamentarium is displayed in full, I can review some possible lines of direction. To start with the most general point, we may want to resist the whole idea of subsuming truth under the category of the event, at least according to the way Badiou describes the decisionist enigma of evental rupture. Which repeatable cognitive procedures can one use in order to declare that something is an event? And if there are no such procedures, and one’s declaration is basically a leap in the Kierkegaardian dark, why should truth—the product of a declared event—be held hostage to what is outside communicable reason? Preserving the term “truth” for cognitive procedures of multiple kinds might be a better way of securing what Badiou thinks, correctly in my view, any radical politics cannot do without: a means for separating mere opinion from actionable accuracy. It is also dubious, as the history of post-revolutionary situations suggests, that we should think of fidelity to an event as beyond criterial judgment because it is productive of those very criteria the event’s truth brings about. That would make decisions about who is allegiant and who is a betrayer a matter of opinion, or, more realistically, a matter of brute power. There is perhaps a further problem, independent of the internal consistency of Badiou’s approach to truth. It concerns the role of philosophy. Surely the case can be made that the historical analysis of political concepts—tracing the consistency and coherence in their patterns of use—is both a valid philosophical enterprise and a politically useful one, in a way that does not depend in any significant sense on radical evental commitment. All of these remarks circle around the sense that Badiou’s ingenious and powerful argumentative machine, and the vision of the political field it generates, may have left little room for movements that could connect ordinary thought and practice with the realization of justice. The

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<sup>2</sup> See Badiou’s *Being and Event*. The second part of his ontological development, in which the intra-worldly realization of truth events is explored in greater detail, is found in *Logics of Worlds*.

ordinary may be as degraded as Badiou contends—it certainly doesn't look great—but its wholesale disavowal and repudiation may also embody pathologies of thought, flights from the actual that serve, or can be made to serve, the interests of the status quo in hidden and dangerous ways.

### Works Cited

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