Review

The meaning of Sarkozy

Alain Badiou

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Written before and after Sarkozy's election to the French presidency in 2007, *The Meaning of Sarkozy* gathers a range of interventions – mainly seminars delivered at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris – in which Alain Badiou combines political passion and philosophical rigour. It is unsurprising that this publication has triggered intense reactions, attracting the attention of the media in France and abroad for reasons that are not entirely philosophical.

This is a razor-sharp book, which in some passages recalls a pamphlet from another epoch and in others the act of accusation addressed by a philosopher to the present *Zeitgeist*. But despite the celebrity of the name titling the book, despite the ruthless portraits the author sketches of that celebrity – 'police chief whose dream costume is a gigantic rubber penis', 'Napoleon the very small', 'rat man' (pp. 9, 36) and so on – and also despite the bitter public accusations that these portraits provoke (including that of anti-Semitism), this is not a book about Nicolas Sarkozy. And moreover it is not the reference to a political celebrity as such that makes this work so intriguing. In Badiou's perspective Sarkozy constitutes the name of the unconscious subjectivity haunting the French parliamentary scene, a subjectivity that has its roots in Petainism, but expresses itself in the democratic monotheism and sacred ritual through which this religion is reproduced: the elections.

What Badiou proposes here is a 'meta-political' reflection, that is, an attempt to think politically about what politics has become in the present. Elections constitute a handy pretext, and it is not the first time Badiou uses them as an anchor for critique. It is well known that in his perspective elections represent the illusory, empty, free choice on which parliamentary democracy is based; plus we are also made aware that they are essentially repressive and validated by a numeric unfolding, which is indifferent to content as well as to thought. However, the book emphasizes the nebulous mind-disorientation, the generalized sense of impotence that Badiou recognizes as actually

going together with – if not supporting – elections. Disorientation, contends the philosopher, constitutes the social basis for the success of reactionary characters such as Sarkozy, who take advantage of it, turning it into a source of irrational feelings. Fear, for instance, played a prominent role in the 2007 elections, and was derived from ‘threats’ such as migrants, underprivileged young people, Muslim nations, workers and so on. The result is that when fear is incorporated into the state apparatus, it leaves Sarkozy’s ‘hands free, because once the state has been occupied by fear, it can freely create fear’ (p. 13).

If in order to escape this chain of disorientation and irrational fear, one cannot rely on the leftist response, which consists in the propagation of a ‘secondary fear’, that is, the fear of Sarkozy himself (or of whoever occupies this place), then what can be done? Arguing from a psycho-analytical perspective, Badiou urges us to follow Lacan’s suggestion and ‘raise impotence to impossibility’ (p. 34). It is necessary to establish a ‘different duration’ within the reign of opinions; ‘an impossible time therefore, but a time that is ours’ (p. 36). This new time is only achievable by imposing upon ourselves a ‘truth discipline’ (p. 41) in order to hold firmly onto those political points that hegemonic discourse regards as impossible, unattainable.

As Badiou’s conception of politics is that of a truth procedure faithful to the event, so that every political sequence is something unique and unrepeatable, he normally tends not to provide ‘agendas’ or very explicit indications as to how to proceed. It is quite surprising then to find in the third chapter what he, with some reserves, defines as ‘neither a program, nor a list, but rather a table of possibilities naturally abstract and incomplete’ (p. 43). It concerns a set of eight prescriptions addressing issues, which are particularly dear to Badiou – from migrant labour to love. The last prescription claims that ‘there is only one world’ (p. 51), and due to its importance, Badiou dedicates an entire chapter to it.

Badiou observes that the hypothesis of ‘another world’ is impracticable for the simple reason that today a shared world as a starting point doesn’t exist. The key is therefore not to idealize another possible humanity, free from inequalities and oppression, but rather to accept that these catastrophes do not exist ‘out there’ but are part of this unique world. What Badiou proposes here is therefore a performative.

It is only by assuming ‘equality of existences at every place in this single world’ (p. 68) that politics can give a sense to the notion of ‘democracy’ and open once again the horizon of emancipation, that is, a new mode of existence of the ‘communist hypothesis’. This has to be done in a way that is capable of going beyond the historical sequences of the past. It is indeed from the disaster of socialist states and the ambiguous lessons of 1968 that one

has to start reflecting in order to reinvent a politics of emancipation that is able to deal with the present wave of nihilism whose name in France is Sarkozy. The key, of course, is to find the impossible point to hold on to, raising impotence to impossibility, without surrender.

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