Review Essay

When the levee breaks: Badiou, philosophy, politics

Confrontation: A Conversation with Aude Lancelin

Alain Badiou, Alain Finkielkraut and Aude Lancelin,
Translated by Susan Spitzer,
Polity, Cambridge, 2014, 166 pp., ISBN: 978-0745685700

Controversies: A Dialogue on the Politics and Philosophy of Our Time

Alain Badiou, Jean-Claude Milner and Philippe Petit,
Translated by Susan Spitzer,
Polity, Cambridge, 2014, 200 pp., ISBN: 978-0745682174

Philosophy and the Event

Alain Badiou and Fabien Tarby,
Translated by Louise Burchill,
Polity, Cambridge, 2013, 160 pp., ISBN: 978-0745653952

Philosophy for Militants

Alain Badiou,
Translated by Bruno Bosteels,
Verso, London and New York, 2012, 128 pp., ISBN: 978-1844679867

Contemporary Political Theory (2016) **15**, e11–e20. doi:10.1057/cpt.2015.26;
published online 28 April 2015

When the levee breaks, you've got at least two problems. One is working out how to contain the rush; the other is actually doing it. Way before one starts to look for causes and forces and agents – the epistemological and reparative work of the aftermath – you've just got to keep on going, under the sign of disaster.

This rather fatuous image occurred to me for at least two reasons while reading these English translations of some of Badiou's recent engagements. Now that Badiou has become one of the biggest philosophical stars in the world, the torrent of texts by, about and around him has become overwhelming. Obviously, it's hardly a matter of containment in this case, merely of trying to keep up. In doing so, however, it's

impossible to avoid the sense that any thoughts one might have about his work are not only necessarily partial, but that he is himself caught up in the torrential rush, constantly having to respond urgently to new events and new problems and new requests, making on-the-go judgements that may lead to a significant alteration of his own convictions, or, on the contrary, may ultimately prove themselves to be missteps or errors. Such tumultuous struggle is surely also an essential feature of political action, plunged as it is into the time of the now.

Yet the image also came to me because it speaks to a division that is crucial to Badiou's philosophy: politics is one thing and philosophy another. Politics is a militant engagement that essays to produce a new kind of egalitarian organization in a specific situation under the pressure of events; philosophy is a derivative practice that re-uptakes elements of politics, love, art and science to construct an intellectual space in which these heterogeneous components or 'conditions' can be configured as conceptually compatible with each other. For Badiou, notoriously, there can be no such thing as 'political philosophy'. Yet there is also no philosophy without politics. Part of the essential work of philosophy proper – as a thinking of the thinking of its conditions – is already multiple. It must first break with active politics in order to establish a real difference from it; it must then return to this politics from the perspective of the Idea; in this return, it can perhaps offer tools for further political action; finally, in doing so, it must take care not to confound itself or the Idea with politics once again.

You can see the paradoxes: insofar as politics is at stake, the struggles of the present affect the sense of thought; insofar as philosophy is at stake, there must be a temporal and conceptual lag between the emergence of the militant political work and its seizure by philosophy. Yet the differences between them are not always so clear – or, at least, do not always appear so clearly. Insofar as philosophy is genuinely responding to political militancy, it must retain some trace of that militancy in its own action. Does such a trace constitute a political injunction in its turn? Can it serve to sustain or even return a potential to an active situation? How can it restrain itself from the temptation, endemic to philosophy, of thinking it knows more or better than the political actors themselves?

So the necessary time-lag between politics and philosophy also involves a peculiar kind of disjunctive immediacy or interlacing; the necessary lag between the invention and incarnation of a new thought in politics, and its reformulation as an idea in and for philosophy can also seem like a kind of ghastly nocturnal cloning. As Badiou *détourne*s Hegel, Nietzsche and Wallace Stevens in his brilliant lecture 'The Enigmatic Relationship between Philosophy and Politics', reproduced as the first chapter of *Philosophy for Militants*:

It is indeed the case that we philosophers work at night, after the day of the true becoming of a new truth. Yes, we hope, we believe that one day the 'bright obvious' will rise up motionless, in the stellar coldness of its ultimate form. It will be the last stage of philosophy, the absolute Idea, the complete revelation. But this does not come to pass. (Badiou, 2012a, pp. 16–17)

In the light of dawn, all philosophical ideas must take on an attenuated cast. Yet, even in their diurnal dissipation, ideas never simply dissolve into non-being.

This sense of the strange temporal and conceptual redoubling of Badiou himself under such conditions is exacerbated here by the fact that at least two of the books under review are precisely ‘Conversations’ or even ‘Dialogues’, in which Badiou confronts – at once in ‘real time’ and in ‘book time’ – persons and positions irreducible to his own. If he receives star billing on the covers and publicity for reasons that are not only alphabetical, it would be misleading to see these simply as books ‘by’ Badiou. On the contrary, at least two of his interlocutors here – Finkielkraut and Milner – are respectable thinkers in their own right, even if they are perhaps not as well known outside the Hexagon as they should be. Moreover, they would both have to be considered Badiou’s ‘enemies’: Finkielkraut, simply put, is a French Jewish liberal commentator on cultural and political matters who sees himself as an heir to Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt in a nationalistic frame; Milner, if you don’t mind me racking up a truly hallucinatory set of modifiers, is an ex-Maoist-post-Foucauldian-Lacanian-Chomskyan linguist. The third book is essentially an extended interview with a young French philosopher Tarby, himself the author of several monographs on contemporary philosophy; the fourth a brief collection of transcribed talks at various locales, with a tiny interview by François Gauvin as an appendix. In other words, these books present us with a peculiar generic and temporal *mélange*.

Of all the well-known thinkers currently working comparable veins of political theory today – such as Giorgio Agamben, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Roberto Esposito, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, Peter Sloterdijk and Slavoj Žižek – possibly only Agamben and Rancière share anything like Badiou’s extraordinary attentiveness to the specificities of forms of address. Certainly, all these luminaries think about genre and write in a variety of genres. But in Badiou’s case these differences are established and exposed and exacerbated by his own extreme formalism, which goes all the way down, from his notorious ontology founded on set-theoretical mathematics, to his predilections for poets such as Stéphane Mallarmé. For Badiou, the most minimal differences can take on maximal political consequences. Yet he also holds, as a self-proclaimed ‘Platonist’, that Ideas must be irreducible to their expression. On the one hand, we witness an incredible attention to the freighting and consequences of minimal differences in forms of address; on the other, a conviction that ideas are not irreparably bound to such differences. This is a crucial generative paradox of Badiou’s *oeuvre*.

The dialogue is self-evidently a form with an august philosophical history, stemming from Plato himself. The difficulties it poses to interpretation stem from a number of its conventions, for example: its framing, often as reported conversations of reported conversations, which renders its contents unstable (did the events really take place in the way the dialogue seems to propose?); its deployment of characters

who occupy an unsettled ontological space between fiction and reality ('Socrates' is at once an historically-attested real person and a character invented by Plato and Xenophon); its shuttling between narration and argumentation, action and recollection. As Ferrell (2002, p. 5) notes: 'the traits of a suspension of conclusion, suspension of authorial intention or production of a *Gestalt*, is brought about through the linguistic code's permitting the uncertainty of more than one source of authority/authorial comment within the same text'. Given that Badiou (2012b) has recently released a 'hyper-translation' of Plato's *Republic*, in which he deliberately transforms elements of the original, the rigours of the form cannot be very far from his mind.

As for the (recorded) 'conversation', if it is clearly enough a genre whose prime progenitor is the 'single authored' written dialogue, it partakes of a strenuously different dynamic. A conversation also differs from an interview, with which it shares features: the dialogic presentation, the surprise (or irritation or boredom) of the emergence of an unheralded theme, the play between interpersonal dynamics and philosophical abstractions and so on. But they differ in crucial ways. An interview is usually dyadic and hierarchical, in which a likely more-junior questioner (or questioners) respectfully interrogates the more important respondent about certain themes, obscurities or trajectories in the latter's work. (This is the case for *Philosophy and the Event* with Tarby.) This ground-fiction of the interview's dyadic hierarchy doesn't mean the dynamic can't be inverted or displaced. But the struggle over power-relations in an *interview* is often a more gentle and orderly affair than the fervently-pursued *conversations* or *debates*. Certainly, points of obscurity can be better examined in the case of the respectful interview; just as certainly, a too-gentle interviewer can leave the audience or readers disappointed. The injunctions for clarification and dissemination that should govern interviews struggle with the countervailing powers of authority and immediacy.

But a conversation has a more polemical cast from the start. Conversations can require moderators to break a deadlock or prevent total overrun, yet can also force out differences in existing positions. This can happen even when the interlocutors are too furious to listen properly to what the other is saying. But surprising conversions or unexpected compatibilities can emerge, too. And, much like dialogues, conversations can shift rapidly between local contingencies and essential concepts, sometimes even transforming the relation between these as they unfold.

In other words, perhaps despite appearances, genuine similarities and convergences, a dialogue is not a conversation is not a debate. Lancelin, the moderator of the Finkielkraut-Badiou *Confrontation*, opens her very interesting 'Foreword' by invoking Philippe Moray's imperative to *never debate!* Lancelin is a highbrow French journalist of repute and the presiding genius of *Contre-courant*, moderating a monthly book show in which Badiou unleashes his didactic and polemical genius upon guests. If Badiou is clearly an aficionado of such encounters, he is attentive to their limitations: a real-time online TV panel is not the same as a conversation destined to end up as a book. *Controversies* likewise opens with an introduction

titled 'Unreconciled' by Petit, and concludes with a 'Postscript', in which the interlocutors reflect on their exchanges, both seeking to further justify and reinforce their antipathies.

So the differences between the genres at stake in these books – comprising conversations, a protracted interview, rewritten short lectures and various appendices – are absolute, if subtle and mobile, flirting with others that are to be welcomed (the 'dialogue') or repressed (the 'debate'). These differences therefore need to be kept in mind if these books are to be read properly. Yet it is difficult to do so for the reasons I have suggested, and for further reasons I will indicate. Above all, the distinctions between philosophy and politics, between ideas and action, and between 'now' and 'then', are placed under distinct pressure in and by the genres themselves.

Badiou reflects explicitly upon these issues in the aforementioned essay that opens *Philosophy for Militants*. As he notes, philosophy has always harbored a kind of constitutive division within itself, between the desire for its own continuation and a drive-to-its-own-death. This division has a bizarre temporality. The desire for continuation is a demand that philosophy have a future. But such a future integrally unsettles the stability of philosophy, which has to keep up with unprecedented developments that threaten its own definition. On the other hand, philosophy's death-wish drives it to seek its own self-overcoming. Badiou concludes: 'It is not impossible that the future of philosophy always takes the form of a resurrection. The old philosophy, like the old man, is dead; but this death is in fact the birth of the new man, of the new philosopher' (Badiou, 2012a, p. 6). Moreover, this paradoxical, 'intermittent' temporality of resurrection – dare I say 'metempsychosis'? – gives philosophy a singular eternality (see Gibson, 2012).

This *a-temporal* philosophical division finds itself re-divided in turn. On the one side, we rediscover the ancient self-conception of philosophy as a search for 'the knowledge of truth in the theoretical domain' and 'the knowledge of values in the practical domain' (Badiou, 2012a, p. 8). This is typically the philosophy of the schools, where the philosopher is the exemplary schoolmaster, from Aristotle to Badiou himself. Such philosophy is a transmitting device from one generation to another, from master to students. On the other side, we find the deracinated philosophers, whose paradigm is Socrates himself: an outrageous mobile and metamorphic event. Such philosophers, without the carapace of an institution, tend to demand acts of conversion. As such, philosophy is essentially divided between what Lacan (2007) called 'the discourse of the University' and the 'discourse of the Master'. Philosophy is condemned to at once retreat from and to mount an assault on the world, to detain the routines of transmissible knowledge in its 'interior' and to 'corrupt the youth' in its 'exterior'.

So Badiou establishes his position with regard to both contemporary philosophy and to non-philosophy at once. Badiou seeks the points at which philosophy inadvertently falls back into the general corruption of the world; but he also seeks the points at which the world itself demands philosophy. 'Corruption' must

be given a philosophical bearing. It is not merely the everyday corruption of violence and money, but a corruption of thought that celebrates particularity, totality, inconsistency and injustice. Yet even corruption must harbor a point of immanent resistance, which demands the restitution of universalism, infinity, consistency and justice.

But in this recourse to extra-philosophical elements, Badiou simultaneously has recourse to *an interpretation of the a-historicity of relations between the concepts and forms-of-presentation of philosophy itself* – a recourse that is simultaneously an auto-differentiation. We're back to generic questions. Philosophy is 'creative repetition', simultaneously split between the form and 'the variable form of the unique form' (Badiou, 2012a, p. 16). As act, philosophy is a repetition, formally the same; but in this repetitive drive of the same-in-difference, it is at once out of time and intervening into its times in attending to the historically situated emergence of new truths. Yet even this does not make philosophy's address to the present properly political in its own right.

In a recent exchange with Gauchet, entitled *Que Faire?* in express homage to the French translation of Lenin's *What is to be done?* Badiou clarifies the struggle:

The big problem that we've inherited from the 20th century is of knowing how to treat the question of the power [*puissance*] of enemies. I think like you that adversity teaches us things and has to be incorporated. Contrary to what is often affirmed, I am not a leftist, nor even a radical. I have always done politics with the idea that it is first necessary to inquire, discuss, gather contradictory opinions. One is ignorant and a terrorist if one shuts oneself off at once from all dialogue. (Badiou, in Badiou and Gauchet, 2014, pp. 83–84)

Badiou switches here from (in his doctrine) a properly philosophical position to a properly militant one. For Badiou, philosophy *must* have a theory of the enemy. Such a theory is already there in Plato and other ancient thinkers, but one could just as easily cite major figures much closer to us: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Schmitt, Heidegger, Derrida and many more, have dedicated a great deal of effort to discerning its lineaments and import. Badiou invokes Kant's image of philosophy as a battlefield. As he says to Tarby: 'We are already powerless enough as it is, alas, in the face of real enemies without us falling for imaginary ones' (Badiou and Tarby, 2013, p. 33). Militant politics must pass through dialogue, but it cannot permit itself to be duped by the kinds of dialogues permitted by the democratic form, whether of Athens then or Athens now: one's enemies in a democracy can always pass themselves off as democratic discussants, even if they are ferociously anti-democratic. If philosophy is not itself such militancy, it must testify to the militant's experience, inscribing the acknowledgment of the sinister *powers* of the enemy within itself as an idea that helps discriminate 'real' and 'imaginary' enemies.

Such a practice, however, can lead to some surprising assertions on Badiou's part, especially when the 'politics' involves some historically unprecedented

developments. In *Philosophy and the Event*, Badiou responds to a question about contemporary media propaganda thus:

Sure, people are in front of their TV night after night. But in France, before the eighteenth century, even the tiniest village had a church with its priest ... when all that was living, it constituted an unbelievably wide-ranging and powerful propaganda apparatus that both structured people's lives internally and organized the transmission of traditions. Today, with the media, we have a technological, differentiated apparatus. Are we to consider that this has a great, more obvious influence than the propaganda apparatus I've just mentioned? This is not at all evident. (Badiou and Tarby, 2013, p. 8)

On the one hand, you can take Badiou's point here. There's something tiresome, not to mention patronizing and false, about MIT-scholar-type declarations of the particular evils of today's media empires. Ditto for the appalling celebrations of the allegedly emancipatory powers of new media (see Bartlett, 2013). So it's good to be reminded of the powers of ancient Ideological State Apparatuses, not least when given a post-Foucauldian inflection. Yet does Badiou's response capture how deeply new media have infiltrated the recesses of human behavior and interaction? When you decapitated an enemy with a sword in a mediaeval conflict, that sword was not directly connected to a set of distributed computing devices in real-time, pitilessly monitoring the data of how fast, how hard, and how often you hit your opponents, nor comparing that with the data from other combatants before tabulating the results and then getting the chain-mail-clad HR consultants down there to advise you to work on your swing ... 'New media' have not only enabled real-time algorithmic global financialization, but a total reorganization of capitalist corporate practices. Badiou aside, it is unclear whether anybody – save, perhaps Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowden and their ilk – has properly taken the gauge of how post-convergent computing has radically transformed possibilities for political action.

Another question concerns climate-change. Again responding to Tarby, Badiou calls environmentalism 'a very powerful ideology', continuing: 'Let's first note, as regards the possibility of global warming, that no proof has been established. Environmentalist propaganda compresses predictions of development that bear on half a century and makes out as though there will be a catastrophe within a year' (Badiou and Tarby, 2013, p. 34). I would have thought that the 'proof' is actually as persuasive as these things get these days: a genuinely global body of data of very heterogeneous kinds correlated into a compelling pattern ratified by all kinds of scientist. Badiou adds that 'humanity has endured things infinitely more serious and radical than those which are being forecast now' (Badiou and Tarby, 2013, p. 34). Perhaps that's true – although the Ice Age presumably can't be assigned any kind of anthropogenetic causation – but isn't he here also dismissing the unprecedentedly rapid destruction of the earth's flora and fauna, as well as the possibility of the environment becoming unpropitious for almost all multi-cellular life? Is Badiou

really on the side of bugs and giant squids? Badiou concludes: ‘with environmentalism, we’re dealing with a millenarianism’ (Badiou and Tarby, 2013, p. 34). Perhaps that is also true, but there are at least two features that run counter to other millenarianisms: (i) the near-unanimity of post-Galilean scientists regarding its status; (ii) the apocalypse isn’t being deferred as the due-date passes, but accelerating toward us.¹

Badiou’s conditioning by militant politics literally forces him – for the aforementioned reasons of philosophical probity and consistency – to confront such phenomena according to a triple operation. He first gathers evidence; second, rationally assesses it according to an axiom of universal emancipation; then, third, decides according to the dictates of the philosophical trace of the friend/enemy distinction. When it is a case of such emergent limit-political phenomena of our own ‘obscure’ world, Badiou’s judgements seem contestable. But when it is a case of more familiar political conflicts and dilemmas, Badiou’s procedure invariably provokes extraordinary results.

Perhaps nowhere today is the problematic of the friend/enemy distinction more pronounced and urgent than in the discourses regarding anti-Semitism, Israel and Palestine. Badiou has been involved in controversies before over these very issues. In Lancelin’s words:

When in 2005 Editions Lignes brought out a collection of his texts ... under the title *Circonstances 3: Portées du mot ‘juif’*, Alain Badiou had to contend with an extremely distressing campaign against him. Originally launched by *Les Temps modernes*, a journal whose editor, Claude Lanzmann, had admittedly been attacked by Cécile Winter in the book’s appendix, the campaign was relentlessly propagated by a few malicious activists and aimed at nothing less than branding Badiou a far-left anti-Semite. (Badiou *et al*, 2014a, p. xiii; see also Badiou and Tarby, 2013, pp. 26–32)²

Undoubtedly as a result of this campaign, many reputable scholars seem happy to condemn Badiou as ‘that anti-semite’! One of the conceptually distressing elements of such repulsive crimes as the *Charlie Hebdo* shootings is the extent to which a kind of neoliberal ‘identity politics’ has now infected and dominates all public discussions. Particular predicates – ‘Man’, ‘Woman’, ‘Black’, ‘White’, ‘Jew’, ‘Muslim’ and so on – are given a kind of leaden ontological freight that they cannot and should not bear, locking everybody into, well, their supposed identities. At the same time that this predicate lock-down is enforced, one is also forced to assent to the absolute rights of everyone else to their own identitarian lockdowns. Badiou couldn’t be a more savage critic of the contradictions and abuses that attend such positions. As he tells Tarby: ‘While reactionary, and particularly fascist, politics are always ferociously identitarian, it seemed, all the same, clear to me that emancipatory politics were universalist!’ (Badiou and Tarby, 2013, p. 27).

Moreover, doctrines of identitarianism come with a politics of affect. What does affect enable? What do charges of affect license? How is affect linked to thought? As Badiou remarks to Finkelkraut in the course of a discussion of French national identity: 'When you say that these people [North African immigrant Muslims] hate us, who or what do they hate? They don't hate France: that's totally wrong, trust me. I was involved in politics with them for decades. I'd be more inclined to think that they're the last true patriots, because they still believe in a democratic and revolutionary France; they're still shocked and deeply hurt by the fact that they're persecuted' (Badiou *et al*, 2014a, p. 16). Note how Badiou overturns the accusation that the accursed Other hates us and our lifestyles, maintaining first that such putative Others are holding us to our own principles which we have denied them, and, second, that the concomitant affect is not hate but hurt. Finkelkraut strikes back, accusing Badiou of occupying a 'psychologically gratifying position': 'You never have to deal with dilemmas or problems, you can simply ignore the conflicts of duties, and you can indulge in easy outrage because the only people you ever encounter are scoundrels' (Badiou *et al*, 2014a, p. 18). If this isn't quite correct, you can see how Finkelkraut's point seeks to dissolve, from an entirely different philosophical basis, Badiou's fundamental distinction between philosophy and politics.

Given that Finkelkraut and Milner are card-carrying defenders of the French and Israeli states, much hostility is evident in these pages. Even if some of the discussions bears on issues specific to French nationalism, their liveliness, commitment and brilliance is of more than local interest. Milner in particular makes some very powerful points, bearing on fundamental rival ideas of what constitutes politics: 'for me, there's no politics in the sense that Alain Badiou means it. If politics has any meaning for me, a meaning beyond the purely conversational, it has to do with one minimal distinctive feature: politics begins from the moment when the killing of the adversary is, so to speak, beyond the pale' (Badiou *et al*, 2014b, p. 99). Milner's deployment of the friend/enemy distinction is founded on the foreclosure of murder as the ground of politics proper. Badiou responds: 'If you're speaking about the need to defend yourself when you've achieved a dominant position or about the need to recognize that there are traitors and collaborators, if you're speaking in actual situations, then that moralizing discourse is totally bogus' (Badiou *et al*, 2014b, p. 101). Neither violence nor dialogue can be excluded from nor constitute the essence of politics.

Foucault (2003, p. 15) once inverted Clausewitz to say: 'politics is the continuation of war by other means', and Badiou certainly follows Foucault in this. But what separates Badiou is his refusal to reduce the war to a redistribution or transformation of power-relations alone. We're back to Plato: the wars of philosophy must be conditioned by struggles for political emancipation, which today require 'a new way of thinking and doing political action' (Badiou, 2012a, p. 63). As Badiou writes in another stunning short piece: 'The great problem is to create a paradigm of heroism beyond war, a figure that would be neither that of the warrior nor that of the soldier, without for this reason returning to Christian pacifism, which is only the passive form

of sacrifice' (Badiou, 2012a, p. 46). In accordance with the directives of politics, philosophy must war for justice, to establish 'a peace of the discontinuous'. Philosophy must be, to steal a phrase from Hill (2014), a *peacemonger*.

Notes

- 1 In response to a question regarding this very point at a masterclass in Melbourne, Australia, on 24 November 2014, Badiou noted that much of the difficulty in treating the question of environmentalism derives from the extremely complex way in which it crosses science and politics – with one of the unfortunate effects being the reduction of the science to a debating-point polarized by forms of opinion that dispense with any relation to knowledge or truth.
- 2 For the offending essay, see Badiou (2006). See also A. Badiou *et al* (2013). In English, one can track some of the ongoing consequences of these events, plus more recent statements by Badiou on political actualities, at the Verso Website: as ever, readers should be aware that the 'Comments' threads are not always as tempered, informative or informed as one might like. See, for example, <http://www.versobooks.com/blogs/1833-the-red-flag-and-the-tricolore-by-alain-badiou>.

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