



## Polemics

Alain Badiou

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French philosopher Alain Badiou's new book is really a polemic against the nihilism of our contemporary condition, a savage attack on the meaninglessness of our present. This is, after all, a time in which we have given up on any hope of emancipatory politics, and where we cling to our miserable material comforts, resigned to the inevitability of the global neo-liberal capitalism. This is a time when democracy becomes more and more an empty, media-driven spectacle of mediocrity, and worse, the ideological rallying point — along with human rights — of Western militarism and US global hegemony. It is a time when universal notions of truth and justice are forfeited for 'postmodern' relativism in the realm of philosophy, and 'postmodern' romanticism in the realm of art.

Badiou's project has been to revitalize — indeed, to reinvent — the Enlightenment: to assert a militant politics of emancipation against democracy; to assert philosophy against 'ethics'; to assert 'affirmationist' art against 'entertainment'; to proclaim a genuine dimension of universality against communitarian particularism and the narcissism of identity politics. Central here is his notion of the Truth-Event — an event that is entirely unpredictable, that is not reducible to or even thinkable within, the circumstances of the situation in which it arises, and indeed, even retroactively constructs these circumstances: something like the French or Russian Revolutions in the field of politics; or the extraordinary encounter between Abelard or Heloise in the field of love; or Cantor's invention of set theory in the field of mathematics. Events of this kind produce an encounter with a universal truth — an encounter through which one becomes genuinely a subject, and in which existing situations are radically altered, 'pierced' to the core.

The role of philosophy, according to Badiou, is to think — and to allow *us* to think — these exceptional events that transcend our everyday existence. But perhaps because of this, philosophy also gives us important critical tools to analyse that which does *not* live up to the dignity of the event: situations where, on the contrary, truth is made destitute in the name of knowledge; where politics is disavowed in the name of 'democracy'; and where we have, instead of the event, a series of non-events or false events. What is fascinating, then, about *Polemics* — what makes it so engaging — is that here philosophy's powerful eye is turned to everything today in which truth is defiled and



dissimulated: the ideological obfuscation, hypocrisy and terrorism of the 'War on Terror'; the ignominy of the war in Iraq; the arrogance and emptiness of US imperialism; the fetishism of parliamentary democracy; the pettiness of the Islamic headscarf law in France; the authoritarian and racist policing of young people (Arabs and blacks) in the suburbs of Paris. In a series of short pieces in Part One — many of which have previously been published elsewhere — Badiou critically examines these appalling situations. Their nihilism, banality, farcicality and violence are exposed in a way that is intellectually rigorous, militantly engaged and, at the same time, sarcastically humorous.

Let's take the piece 'On September 11 2001', which was first published in the weeks following that strange (false) event and at a time when a new ideological paradigm — 'the war on terror' — was beginning to cast its shadow over the world. Badiou 'deconstructs' (a term that I'm sure he would disapprove of) the very discourse of terrorism and the 'war on terrorism' — showing that it has no objective, neutral meaning, that it is an ideological device used in the service of Western hegemony and US imperialism, masking the strategic manoeuvres and the covert alliances between terrorists and the masters they no longer serve. Here philosophy is used in a practical and applied way to expose the inconsistencies, lies, hypocrisies and absurdities in an ideological discourse that has now become virtually totalitarian. Let's take another essay: that which attacks the law introduced in France in 2004 banning the wearing of religious insignia (read: the Islamic headscarf) in schools and other public spheres. Behind the misguided feminism and pompous Republicanism, Badiou detects a brutal capitalist logic that demands the exposure and free circulation of female bodies and faces — in which commodification masquerades as liberation; as well as a kind of fear of Islam as the religion of the poor and the immigrant. In another piece there is a savaging of what Badiou sees as the fetishism of democracy — the way that parliamentary democracy has become the only acceptable form of politics today, thus eclipsing any real emancipatory alternative. This fetishism was highlighted in the strange situation in 2002 when Le Pen's National Front made it through to the second round in the French Presidential elections, creating inordinate panic and hysterical hand-wringing among the Left, leading them to rally around the democratic flag and vote for Chirac as a kind of moral duty. Badiou shows quite convincingly that so far from Le Pen being somehow heterogeneous to the political order, he is rather the extreme excrescence of a degenerate democratic scene which has already incorporated — in a slightly more 'polite' form — his anti-immigrant racism. Do we not see, not only in France but elsewhere in the democratic world, parties of the right and left engaged in the miserable game of trying to outdo one another on 'law-and-order' and 'border security' issues, and toughening up on 'illegal immigration'? Is not Le Pen simply a perverted expression of a political system that is already highly authoritarian and xenophobic? The more



fundamental point that Badiou makes is that voting is a waste of time, that it was and still should be an anathema to any genuine radical, and, furthermore, that the phenomenon of a Le Pen should not lead us to taking succour from parliamentary democracy, but rather to inventing new forms of mass politics to confront such threats.

For me, this is where Badiou is at his best — not so much in the rather complicated and somewhat obscure mathematical formulations of some of his other, denser works, but in these short, sharp, caustic and rather funny polemical attacks on the world around us — attacks which, at the same time, offer a unique and brilliant diagnosis of the nihilism of the modern condition.

Part Two of the book is devoted to a critical exploration of the way that the signifier ‘Jew’ is often deployed as part of a conservative political discourse aimed at the legitimization of the state of Israel. What Badiou sets out to confront here is the stigma of anti-Semitism that is often placed upon those who are critical of Israel — including many Jews who are courageous enough themselves to do so. This is a very complicated issue — how does one engage in a critique of the brutal colonialist policies of Israel without falling into this trap, and while acknowledging that there are indeed some on the left whose politics verge on anti-Semitism? In a way that is both sensitive and courageous, Badiou seeks to unpack some of these problems through the series of essays, newspaper interviews, speeches, and even excerpts from one of his novels. The most controversial contention here is that the fact that the Holocaust aimed at the extermination of people the Nazis called ‘Jews’ does not and cannot bestow upon the Jew any kind of special privileged status or essential identity, or an eternal position of victim — and that to claim that it does is to mirror, in a reverse way, this discursive persecution. Moreover, rather than identifying with a particular community and using this identification to perpetuate the idea of Israel as a state promised to the Jews alone, Badiou suggest another understanding of the word ‘Jew’, another way of being Jewish — to assert a kind of empty universality, a sense of not-belonging. Indeed, it has always been this historic state of ‘homelessness’ of the Jews which led to so many of their vital contributions to secular and radical politics. We are reminded here of the great tradition of Jewish atheism — Spinoza, Freud and Marx, all of whom broke with their established religion. The emphasis here is on a politics of universality — a politics that, as Saint Paul said, recognizes neither Jew nor Greek (p. 188) — which is, in other words, not rooted in a particular ethnicity, community or religious identity.

But what possibilities are there today for a universal politics, a genuine politics of emancipation? This is the question addressed in Part Three of *Polemics*, where Badiou examines two political interventions that he considers to be historically unique and pertinent to any consideration of radical politics today — the Paris Commune (1871) and the Cultural Revolution in China



(1966–1976). The detailed exploration of the sequences of these two events constitutes the more theoretically substantive section of the book. Badiou sees these as privileged sites of politics — events which must be given serious philosophical and political consideration, for they have certain lessons for us today in this time of a-political nihilism. The key feature of these two events — both of which were violent, dramatic and ultimately ended up being crushed by the forces of reaction — is that they gave us a brief glimpse of the possibility of a politics outside what Badiou calls the ‘party-state’. In other words, they were both examples of a libertarian politics which did not seek to reinvent State power, which broke away from official political parties, and which experimented with different and more participatory forms of mass democracy. For me, the Paris Commune is a much more pertinent example of a genuine libertarian politics than the Cultural Revolution, which was more doctrinaire, violent, and imbued with the pernicious personality cult of Mao. But for Badiou, the point is that both serve as examples of genuine political innovation. They also point to the importance of, and at the same time the dangers that lie in wait for, a radical politics that seeks to free itself from the traditional model of the political party and the apparatus of the State. The central ambiguity of radical politics in the past was really this position *vis-à-vis* the State: on the one hand, it sought the ‘withering away’ of the apparatus on the State, and on the other, it was always already part of the machinery of the State through the representative organ of the party — whether the mass social-democratic party or the revolutionary vanguard, both of which could be seen as a kind of State-in-waiting, ready to take over the operation of power.

What we need today — something that is echoed by Badiou in this last section — is a new form of politics that is beyond the State, that does not seek to take over State power but rather invents new practices, new ways of being, new ways or relating to one another beyond the State. It is curious, then, that Badiou dismisses anarchism (p. 321) as a political alternative when the anarchist tradition has been engaging with the question of politics without a State and without a Party for quite some time; and where modern examples of non-statist, non-party radical politics like the Zapatistas — whom Badiou has also commented favourably upon — seem to be embodying the very principles of decentralization, autonomy and direct democracy that anarchism has always espoused. There are certain parallels between Badiou’s politics and anarchism that could be drawn out — whether or not Badiou himself would consent to this. But we can leave this question for another time.

So what are we to make of Badiou, this strange — and yet increasingly prominent — figure in contemporary Continental philosophy, the figure which Jacques Ranciere refers to as the ‘yet Unidentified Flying Object that has recently landed on our soil?’ (Jacques, 2004). What Badiou offers us is a philosophy and a politics of affirmation — one that affirms a fundamental



commitment to emancipation, truth and universality against the contemporary 'postmodern' *doxa* of finitude, finality and particularity. It is a philosophy and a politics that asserts in the face of all the nihilism of the modern world, the unconditionality of truth, the universality of justice, the 'immortality' of the subject and the ethical dignity of extraordinary events. All these themes are not only reflected in *Polemics*, but are mobilized in a concrete way around 'real world' situations. To see a philosopher who usually deals in the abstract formalism of set theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis, turn his attention to current events — and in a way that is approachable and at the same time highly sophisticated and militantly engaged — makes for fascinating reading.

### References

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### An Introduction to Political Philosophy

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Political philosophy is a field of study that has generated passionate debate for over 2,000 years. This popular political philosophy text allows the reader to negotiate the basic concepts of these debates. In straightforward language, fundamental issues of politics are explored in a systematic, easy to follow manner that make complex concepts accessible to the beginner. Drawing on the works of great political philosophers of the past, Wolff explores ideas of how and to whom material goods, rights and liberties are distributed, and who should hold the political power to decide and enforce such decisions.

The author begins his exploration of political philosophy by outlining conceptions of what the basic 'state of nature' would be like without governance. He demonstrates that these understandings shape one's justification of the presence of the state and what form it should take. The discussion is concluded with the declaration that: 'Nothing genuinely worthy of being called