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In Defense of Alain Badiou

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, here are the article's first two paragraphs:

In Issue 107, Philosophy Now published James Alexander’s ‘A Refutation of Snails by Roast Beef’, an article decrying contemporary French philosopher Alain Badiou (b.1937). Alexander’s jumping-off point was Roger Scruton’s unfavorable review of Badiou’s The Adventure of French Philosophy (2012). He acknowledges that Scruton “obviously dislikes everything Badiou stands for” but takes Scruton to task for being too polite; he writes that “Badiou deserves derision.” A few sentences later, he claims that “a lot of Badiou is rubbish. There is nothing to Badiou be done with it except laugh.” Not even Badiou’s students escape Alexander’s comments: he scoffs that instead of taking notes in Badiou’s lectures, surely the students “just stand and cheer.”

Although I might get much enjoyment from indulging in a similarly dismissive attitude toward Alexander’s largely ad hominem attacks against Badiou, I have chosen a different path in defending him. I honor the dialectical process of Socrates’ philosophical approach; therefore I offer a counterargument to expose the inaccuracy of Alexander’s underestimation of Badiou. I will not advance uninformed opinions based on insufficient familiarity (Alexander confesses a lack of knowledge of Badiou’s oeuvre). Instead, I offer a perspective based on an engagement with and a deep reverence for Badiou’s philosophy.

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In Defense of Alain Badiou

Robert Michael Ruehl describes new political possibilities.

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To formulate my counterposition, I’ll comment on Badiou’s communist orientation and its connection with his philosophy. This will lead to a description of important themes in Badiou’s writings: new possibilities, mathematics as ontology (or the study of being), and set theory’s assistance in justifying revolt. I will not advance uninformed opinions based on insufficient familiarity (Alexander confesses a lack of knowledge of Badiou’s oeuvre). Instead, I offer a perspective based on an engagement with and a deep reverence for Badiou’s philosophy.

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Badiou’s Politics

Badiou does not seek to conceal the connection he makes between philosophy and politics. Debates over his allegiances rage even as he identifies himself politically as a Marxist remaining faithful to the idea of communism. There is little doubt that his Marxist connection, Maoist leanings, and use of ‘communism’ offend some people. Before taking offense, however, it is important to understand Badiou’s position. In an interview with Filippo Del Lucchese and Jason Smith, Badiou defines his communist orientation as follows:

“I don’t think it is absolutely necessary to keep the word communism. But I like this word a lot. I like it because it designates the general idea of a society and of a world in which the principle of equality is dominant, a world no longer structured by classical social relations – those of wealth, the division of labor, segregation, persecution by the state, sexual difference, and so on. That is, for me, what communism is. Communism in the generic sense simply means that everyone is equal to everyone else within the multiplicity and diversity of social functions... There is no reason why a street Sweeper should be hounded by the state and poorly paid while intellectuals in their libraries are honored and at peace – and generally well paid. It’s absurd. What I call communism is the end of this absurdity... It’s in this sense that I am a communist” (‘We Need a Popular Discipline’, 2007).

To be charitable to his intellectual approach, it is important to understand this political view.

Badiou decidedly aligns philosophy with revolutionary
change and disobedience. With Socratic allusions, Badiou writes in *Philosophy for Militants* (2012):

“To corrupt the youth’ is, after all, a very apt name to designate the philosophical act, provided that we understand the meaning of ‘corruption.’ To corrupt here means to teach the possibility of refusing all blind submission to established opinions. To corrupt means to give the youth certain means to change their opinion with regard to social norms, to substitute debate and rational critique for imitation and approval, and even, if the question is a matter of principle, to substitute revolt for obedience” (p.10).

As a liberation thinker, Badiou defines emancipatory politics as an aspect of philosophy, so that philosophy is actually part of a ‘logical revolt’ that aims to understand and express clearly the new possibilities resistance discloses and nurtures. Philosophy aids resistance by helping readers to reflect on political struggles, so they can be rightly disobedient and change the world. It is easy to see how close Badiou seems to be to Karl Marx through Marx’s comment in his ‘Eleventh Thesis On Feuerbach’ (*Theses on Feuerbach*, 1888): “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however, is to change it.” Badiou also desires to change the world.

As part of his engagement with political change, Badiou’s philosophy emphasizes the theme of ‘new possibilities’ – a theme in distinct opposition to contemporary capitalism’s newness and novelty for the sake of titillation, and profit. For Badiou, capitalist newness is in fact repetition: it is the *status quo* for people who live only to consume addictively. Contrary to this, he seeks “possibilities yet to come.” Within the predictable structure of everyday life, such new possibilities appear to be impossible, so Badiou welcomes the unforeseen that disrupts what is decreed as feasible. However, these apparent impossibilities – or unforeseeable possibilities according to established expectations – do not come into the situation from beyond: new possibilities emerge from *within* the situation and its ideas about what counts, what is possible, and what is acceptable. In this way, new possibilities are ‘immanent interventions’ disturbing the *status quo* and accepted knowledge.

Concerning the importance of the transformational potentials within every situation, Badiou writes, “It is a matter of showing how the space of the possible is larger than the one we are assigned – that something else is possible” (*Ethics*, 2013, p.115). New possibilities have disrupted domination and oppression in the past, and will do so again. The large-scale destructive processes that maintain the so-called ‘smooth functioning’ of capitalism are not inevitable, and Francis Fukuyama’s idea that with modern capitalist democracies we have reached the ‘End of History’ is a misbegotten concept: the suppressive constraints that constitute our lives have nothing to do with history in Badiou’s sense. Instead, Badiou associates history with ruptures within the *status quo*. Protests, riots, and the emergence of politics (which is not to be confused with politicking) are integral parts of history’s coming-to-be. This is why Badiou writes about the ‘Rebirth of History’: “I therefore propose to say that we find ourselves in a *time of riots* wherein a rebirth of History, as opposed to the pure and simple repetition of the worst, is signalled to take shape” (*The Rebirth of History*, 2012, p.5). Protests and riots may lead to a mass thinking that unites people degraded by the continuous plunderings of a global capitalism cloaked in ‘democracy’ – an alliance Badiou calls ‘capitalo-parliamentarianism’. When people have had enough, take to the streets, and unite with each other in ways that go beyond geographical space and parochial interests, this is the emergence of a process in which history is reborn. People should not forget how each situation is pregnant with possibilities for revolutionary change simply because uprisings have been infrequent and a capitalist monopoly seems inevitable. Badiou reminds us that despair is not unavoidable, since capitalist dominance is not predetermined. Instead, the possibilities latent within society should provide the oppressed with glints of hope. Throughout his philosophy Badiou remains faithful to the transformative potential, and the conviction that things can be different from what they are.

**Badiou’s Ontology**

Ontology is the study and categorization of what types of things exist. Against more traditional evaluations of it, Badiou argues that ontology is not an area of philosophical specialization: he argues that mathematicians specialize in ontological thought without knowing so, and philosophers are left to explain the radical implications of the mathematicians’ thinking.

Badiou examines the mathematical developments of set theory found in the work of Georg Cantor, Ernst Zermelo, Abraham Fraenkel, and Paul Cohen, and integrates them into his own philosophical system. He argues that set theory shows that there is no transcendent unity to the world – no ‘transcendent oneness’ – nor is there a unity in the material realm. Rather, all declared oneness is the result of a ‘count-as-one’ operation that collects ‘multiplicities’ into an apparently coherent whole by collecting them together into sets. However, this wholeness only comes after the multiplicities have presented themselves to us. Before the artificial imposition of oneness occurs, what exists are multiplicities within other multiplicities.

A minimal insight from set theory is therefore that some things belong and some do not belong because of particular grouping processes; also, through the particular logics of the grouping processes, some things are re-presented or recounted – given added or different significance. Before people begin to name, collect, and include or exclude certain things in the world around them, the unnamed, uncollected aspects are what Badiou calls ‘inconsistent multiplicities’; and after the multiplicities have
been grouped, named, and given various levels of importance, they become 'consistent multiplicities' (*Being and Event*, p.23-30). Within the activity of collecting together and making things ‘one’, however, certain aspects are always overlooked; there are always ‘inexistent’ aspects within the count that have the potential to disrupt or destabilize the categorizations generated through the count-as-one operation.

Although this mathematics-based analysis of reality may seem a little abstract to provide intellectual support for radical change, the opposite is the case. It provides Badiou with a way of understanding the unforeseen emergences of new possibilities into human contexts.

This is how it works. The counting and recounting processes create situations where things have different levels of significance, or ‘intensities of existence’ as Badiou calls them. Badiou is concerned with how something new can emerge from these processes. Because no counting process can add up and constrain every multiplicity, uncounted multiplicities will always exist to threaten the stability of any situation. What he calls an ‘event’ is the fleeting emergence of what was previously a minimally existent aspect within a situation, revealing some new possibility. Once this happens and people located near the site of the rupture see what Badiou describes as the ‘lightning flash’ of an event, they may become faithful ‘subjects’ to it. Thus, an ‘Idea’ (the capital ‘I’ signifies its potential political importance) may slowly take shape and unite those people who are seized by the event (those become faithful subjects who are part of a ‘truth process’).

Badiou undermines various traditional philosophical interpretations of truth, such as the idea that truth is a correspondence between words and things. For instance, in a lecture on the European Graduate School’s website called ‘The Event of Truth’, Badiou says that truth is not ‘a relation of appropriateness between the intellect and the thing intelleced, a relation of adequation which always supposes... that the truth be localizable in the form of a proposition.” Instead, “a truth is, first of all, something new.” Thus Badiou describes the truth process in the following words:

“For the process of a truth to begin, something must happen. What there already is, the situation of knowledge as such, only gives us repetition. For a truth to affirm its newness, there must be a supplement; this supplement is committed to chance. It is unpredictable, incaulcable; it is beyond what it is. I call it an event. A truth appears in its newness because an eventual supplement interrupts repetition. Examples: the appearance with Aeschylus of theatrical tragedy, the irruption with Galileo of mathematical physics, an amorous encounter which changes a whole life, or the French Revolution of 1792” (*The Event of Truth*, available at egs.edu).

Serious political implications follow from his description of the truth process, since not only is intellectual history associated with disruptions, but so is political history. Moreover, knowledge, repetition, the *status quo*, politicking, and the situation are all aspects of a process of ordering, policing and constraining what matters and what does not. By contrast, truths, events, politics, possibilities, and egalitarian emancipation are all aspects of disruptive processes where the excluded or ‘inexistents’ emerge into the world with maximal intensity. Set theory, therefore, aids Badiou’s revolutionary outlook, since through its philosophical implications we can understand how every situation, no matter how stable it may appear, can always be disrupted to allow the oppressed to struggle for liberation. So although Alexander fails to see any justification for revolution in Badiou’s work, Badiou’s analysis of set theory actually provides support for it.
Furthermore, there is no need for a ‘transcendental’ (external) justification for revolt because the justification potentially exists in every situation. Let me offer a thumbnail sketch of why this is so. The state has certain ways of thinking, and so ways of counting people. These lead to different degrees of inclusion and suppression. Those who are suppressed feel the burden of the state’s forced exclusions. Because of the violence that constrains these ‘inexistent’ people within a situation, a disruptive potential is present, waiting for the right time to burst forth – an emergence that will challenge and possibly overthrow the logic structuring their world. There is no reason to look outside the situation for revolutionary justification for this; the situation seems to encourage or even demand it. Alexander does not grasp this. He asks, “if there is only one world, and no world of transcendental moral principles, why should we do anything other than defend the established order? Where does the justification for revolution come from?” Badiou’s answer is that the justification is the dissatisfaction with and rejection of the continuous violence that had tried to keep the people now faithful to the Idea in their inexistent position. Their experiences of domination and oppression and their frustrations provide the justification for revolt. This justification is woven into the social fabric, its structuring logics, and its subsequent policing practices. In other words, the seeds of revolution are within the situation itself as the dominated and oppressed give themselves over to an Idea of ‘egalitarian emancipation’, as Badiou calls it in *The Communist Hypothesis* (2008).

**Badiou Defended & Promoted**

I have highlighted several important aspects of Badiou’s philosophy, showing that it is far from nonsensical and unusable. Instead, it courageously wedds analytic and continental philosophy in a way that makes many philosophers uncomfortable, and which has led to hostile criticisms of Badiou from both sides of that partisan philosophical divide. Badiou also joins mathematical innovations to his intellectual forebears Karl Marx, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, and Jacques Lacan. He weaves these traditions together in a novel, insightful way that offers new possibilities for philosophy.

Much of the dislike for Badiou’s work is clearly politically based: Badiou is a revolutionary communist intellectual who is unafraid to speak openly about and challenge the capitalist brutality he sees around him. This debate disproves naïve assumptions about philosophy being neutral. For Badiou, traditional political philosophy – the kind apparently practiced by Alexander and clearly supported by Scruton – is part of the policing process, decreeing what counts as philosophy and what does not. This tension is clearly seen in the fact that Badiou reveres the May 1968 revolts in France, whereas Scruton “realized he was on the other side” of the struggle. In other words, the struggle over philosophy is also a political struggle.

This confrontation of perspectives should provide extra justification for why people should read a philosopher’s texts for themselves and not depend on others’ interpretations of them. To rest comfortably with Scruton’s and Alexander’s interpretations – or with mine, for that matter – is intellectual laziness. The tension between my position and those I am confronting will hopefully be enough to frustrate interested readers so that they wish to develop their own informed assessments. Generally speaking, engage as many perspectives as possible, always be suspicious of what you are reading, and form your own conclusions only after much deliberation. Philosophy is never complete; it is always in the making. Read Badiou’s work on your own, contribute to this debate through your informed engagement, and do not seek to silence him simply because you disagree with him or do not understand his work. Let us avoid imitating those who supposedly value liberty, democracy, and academic freedom whilst simultaneously subtly advocating censoring, severe policing, and intellectual subservience. Let us avoid a policing similar to that imposed on Socrates, who was fatally silenced by the state for philosophizing.

Badiou poses a challenge to ‘knowledge’ as a form of intellectual policing: he makes it clear that much of what we call education, knowledge, and philosophy is only part of a larger process of constraint, conformity, and capitulation within an economy that seeks to reduce all things to the value of the dollar. I suspect that Alexander somehow recognises that Badiou challenges his stability within an academic environment increasingly entrenched in and loyal to capitalist relations, and that this is why he suggests that he should be silenced or put in the stocks. However, instead of letting philosophy be commodified and used as part of a policing process silencing dissenters, we should ardently support Badiou’s project and rigorously protect philosophy from those who diminish it by trying to use it as a weapon to pummel people into submission. Let us instead adopt Badiou’s posture, which he learned from Plato, and use philosophy as an aid in liberating people from partisan opinions and their concomitant violence, and not as a way to shackle them to parochial outlooks that lead to suppression. As Badiou informs us, “Wherever a human collective is working in the direction of equality, the conditions are met for everyone to be a philosopher” (*Philosophy for Militants*, 2012, p.37). If Badiou gives us anything, therefore, it is an understanding of philosophy as a labor open to all in the project of egalitarian emancipation and social change. To this understanding of philosophy as part of a liberating process, I will remain faithful.

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