

WHY BADIOU IS A ROUSSEAUIST AND WHY WE SHOULD BE TOO

*Simon Critchley**

For the philosopher, the world has arguably always been a disappointing place full of dumb people. Heracleitus was traditionally known as the Weeping Philosopher because his fellow citizens of Ephesus refused to follow the *logos*, the law, principle or reason that governs the universe. Instead, they acted as if they were asleep and had no awareness of what they are doing, like chaff-munching donkeys. Heracleitus became such a hater of humanity that he wandered into the mountains and lived on a diet of grass and herbs before dying suffocated in cow dung. Empedocles, the great political radical, turned his back on the people of Agrigentum and threw himself into Mount Etna in the hope of being transformed into a god (sadly, one of his bronze slippers was spat out by the volcano in confirmation of his mortality). Anaxagoras suggested that mind or *nous* was the moving principle of the universe and counseled his fellow citizens of Miletus to study the moon, sun and stars. When someone asked him, "Have you no concern with your native land?," he replied, "I am greatly concerned with my native land" and pointed to the stars. He was banished from Miletus after a trial where the charge was that he claimed the sun to be a mass of red-hot metal. In the famous Seventh Letter, Plato writes about his two visits to Syracuse where he was invited to educate the young ruler, Dionysius II. There is a story told that such was Dionysius's appreciation of Plato's efforts, that he sold him into slavery and was only saved by being ransomed by the Cyrenaic philosopher Anniceris. Everyone knows that Socrates was famously condemned to death for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. It is less well known that a couple of generations later, during the uprisings against Macedonian rule that followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, Alexander's former tutor, Aristotle, escaped Athens saying, "I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy."

It is therefore something of an understatement to assert that the relation between philosophy and politics has always been a difficult one. In the *Republic*, Socrates wanders out of Athens with Plato's

* Professor of Philosophy, New School for Social Research, New York.

brothers and walks down to the port of Piraeus, leaving the city behind them. After quickly demolishing the prevailing views of justice in Athenian society, Socrates proceeds to dream of another city in dialogue, a just city governed by philosophers whose souls would be orientated towards the Good. This is why the standard objection to Plato that the ideal of the philosophical city is unrealistic, utopian, or impossible to realize is so fatuous. Of course, the philosophers' city is utopian. That's the point. Indeed, one might go a little further and claim that it is the duty of philosophy to build conceptual castles that allow us to imagine that another city and another world are possible, however difficult that may be to achieve in practice. As the saying goes, you are either utopian or a schmuck. Alain Badiou is no schmuck. Moreover, he is a Platonist, which is something that it is very important to keep in mind when reading his political writings assembled in *Polemics*,¹ or *Circonstances* in French, which is my focus today.

The source of Badiou's considerable appeal lies in the understanding of philosophy that he defends. He writes that, "Philosophy is something that helps change existence."² Philosophy is neither technical and largely irrelevant logic-chopping nor is it deconstructive, melancholic poeticizing, what Badiou calls, "the delights of the margin." On the contrary, philosophy is an affirmative, constructive discipline of thought. Crucially, this is thought "not about what is, but about what is not."³ Philosophy is the construction of the formal possibility of something that would break with what Badiou calls the "febrile sterility" of the contemporary world. This is what he calls an *event* and the only question of politics, for Badiou, is whether there is something that might be worthy of the name event. If philosophy, with Heracleitus, is understood as a "seizure of thought of what breaks the sleep of thought,"⁴ then politics is a revolutionary seizure of power which breaks with the dreamless sleep of an unjust and violently unequal world. As such, Badiou is not concerned with the banal reality of existing politics, which he tends to dismiss as "the democratic fetish," but with moments of rare and evanescent political invention and creativity. Like Socrates, Badiou dreams of another city in speech and therefore to accuse him of being unrealistic is to refuse to undertake the

¹ ALAIN BADIOU, *POLEMICS* (Steven Corcoran trans., Verso 2006) [hereinafter BADIOU, *POLEMICS*]. *Polemics* is the translation of *Circonstances*, a series of Badiou's work which has been published in the French language in several parts. These parts include: ALAIN BADIOU, *CIRCONSTANCES 1: KOSOVO, 11 SEPTEMBRE, CHIRAC/LE PEN* (2003); ALAIN BADIOU, *CIRCONSTANCES 2: IRAQ, FOULARD, ALEMANGE/FRANCE* (2004); ALAIN BADIOU, *CIRCONSTANCES 3: PORTÉES DU MOT "JUIF"* (2005); ALAIN BADIOU, *CIRCONSTANCES 4: DE QUOI SARKOZY EST-IL LE NOM?* (2007) [hereinafter BADIOU, *CIRCONSTANCES 4*].

² BADIOU, *POLEMICS*, *supra* note 1, at 9.

³ *Id.* at 10.

⁴ *Id.*

experiment in thought that his philosophy represents.

Before turning more closely to what Badiou means by a politics of the event, let's consider a little further the world's febrile sterility. In *Polemics*, we find withering critiques and witty demolitions of the so-called war on terror, the invasion of Iraq, the bombardment of Serbia, and the pantomime of parliamentary democracy, using the example of the French Presidential elections of 2002. There is a delightfully Swiftian satire on the Islamic headscarf or *foulard* affair and a savage and poignant denunciation of the racism that lead to the riots in the Parisian *banlieues* late in 2005: "We have the riots we deserve."⁵ Many of the political writings are marked by a cool rationalism and a biting comedy. Badiou sees France as a politically "sick" and "disproportionately abject country" whose political reality is not located in the endlessly-invoked republican ideal of the Revolution, but in the reaction against it. For Badiou—and I think he is right—France is the country of Thiers' massacre of the Communards, Petain's collaboration with the Nazis, and de Gaulle's colonial wars. As such, the victory of Sarkozy is an affirmation of Petainism and Le Penism and a continuation of the long war against the enemy within.⁶

As to what Badiou imagines as an alternative to the febrile sterility of the world and its increasingly orgiastic celebrations of social inequality, it is interestingly described as an "Enlightenment, whose elements we are slowly assembling."⁷ Such an Enlightenment can neither be understood as what Badiou calls "state democracy," i.e. parliamentarism, nor "state bureaucracy," the socialist party-state. Political struggle is, "A tooth and nail fight to organize a united popular force."⁸ This requires, and it is a word oft-repeated in these essays, "discipline." It is important to emphasize that this is not party discipline in the old Leninist sense. Rather, what is at issue here is the invention of a politics without party and at a distance from the state, a local politics that is concerned with the construction of a collectivity.

But what might this mean? In order to understand Badiou's idea of politics, I think it is necessary to consider his close proximity to another sometime Platonist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In my view, Badiou's understanding of politics is much more Rousseauian than Marxist. Let me list seven reasons for this claim:

- i. *Formalism*—In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau, like Badiou, is trying to establish the *formal* conditions of a legitimate politics. The more Marxist or sociological

⁵ BADIOU, *POLEMICS*, *supra* note 1, at 114.

⁶ In this connection, see BADIOU, *CIRCONSTANCES* 4, *supra* note 2.

⁷ BADIOU, *POLEMICS*, *supra* note 1, at 56.

⁸ *Id.* at 57.

question of the material conditions for such a politics is continually avoided.

- ii. *Voluntarism*—In Badiou's view, Rousseau establishes the modern concept of politics which is based in the "act by which a people is a people," as he puts it in *The Social Contract*.⁹ For Badiou, the key to Rousseau's idea of popular sovereignty consists in the act of collective and unanimous declaration where a people wills itself into existence. This act is an event understood as a collective subjective act of creation whose radicality consists in the fact that it does not originate in any structure supported within what Badiou calls "being" or the "situation," such as the socio-economic realm or the dialectic of relations and forces of production in Marx. The event of politics is the making of something out of nothing through the act of the subject. Badiou is a political voluntarist.
- iii. *Equality*—Rousseau is the great thinker of what Badiou calls the "generic," which is a key concept in Badiou's system. Though politically, the generic is not a particular maxim of action, but a universal norm: *equality*. For Badiou, true politics has to be based on the rigorous equality of all persons and be addressed to all. The means for the creation of a generic, egalitarian politics is the general will, conceived as that political subject whose act of unanimity binds a collectivity together. As Badiou writes, politics is "about finding new sites for the general will."¹⁰
- iv. *Locality*—From this follows a fourth important point of contact with Rousseau. Although the latter defends a generic politics understood as the act by which a people declares itself a people of equals and addresses itself to all, this can only be realized in a local manner. Badiou insists that true politics has to be intensely local and he is opposed to both delocalized capitalist globalization and its inverse in the so-called anti-globalization movement. But the fact that all politics is local does not mean that it is particular. On the contrary, Badiou, like Rousseau, argues for what we might call a local or situated universalism.
- v. *Rarity*—The issue then becomes one of identifying a locale for politics. It is well known that Rousseau struggled to find examples of legitimate politics. For a while, he pinned

⁹ See JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, *THE SOCIAL CONTRACT* (1762).

¹⁰ BADIOU, *POLEMICS*, *supra* note 1, at 97.

2008]

WHY BADIOU IS A ROUSSEAUIST

1931

his hopes on Geneva, until they started burning his books after the publication of *The Social Contract* in 1762. He also held out hopes for Corsica and wrote a fascinating speculative constitution for Poland, both of which ended in failure. If true politics is the act by which a people wills itself into existence as a radical and local break with what existed beforehand, then such a politics is rare. As we will see in a moment, the only real example of politics that Badiou gives is the Paris Commune.

- vi. *Representation*—Badiou's reflections on the French elections of 2002 culminate in a rehearsal of Rousseau's arguments against representative, electoral government and majority rule in *The Social Contract*. For Rousseau and Badiou, the general or generic will cannot be represented, certainly not by any form of government. Politics, then, is not about governmental representation through the mechanism of the vote, but about the presentation of a people to itself. Badiou writes, "The essence of politics, according to Rousseau, affirms presentation over and against representation."¹¹ The general will cannot be represented. Of course, this leads Rousseau to follow Plato in his critique of theatrical representation or *mimesis* and to argue instead for public festivals where the people would be the actors in their own political drama. What takes place in the public festival is the presence to itself of the people in the process of its enactment.
- vii. *Dictatorship*—However, Badiou goes a step further with Rousseau, a step that I am not able to take. He does not just defend popular sovereignty, which is as controversial as apple pie in the modern era (just as long as no one puts it into practice, one might quip). Badiou also goes on to defend Rousseau's argument for dictatorship sketched towards the end of Book IV of *The Social Contract*. Rousseau argues, thinking as ever of Roman history, that dictatorship is legitimate when there is a threat to the life of the body politic. At such moments of crisis, the laws which issue from the sovereign authority of the people can be suspended, what the Roman jurists called *iustitium*. Badiou's claim is slightly different and he writes that, "Dictatorship is the natural form of organization of political will." The form of dictatorship that Badiou has in mind is not tyranny, but what he calls "citizenry

¹¹ *Id.* at 95.

discipline.” In other words, what Badiou is defending is what Marx, Lenin, and Mao called “the dictatorship of the proletariat.” Let’s just say that I have my doubts about this final move in the argument.

The deeply Rousseauian character of Badiou’s approach to politics becomes clear in the two extended and fascinating lectures that conclude *Polemics*: on the Paris Commune and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In order to grasp Badiou’s argument, it is essential to understand its precise periodization. What interests Badiou in the Paris Commune is “the exceptional intensity of its sudden appearing.”¹² Everything turns here on the moment in March 18th, 1871 when a group of Parisian workers who belonged to the National Guard refused to turn over their weapons to the government of Versailles. It is this moment of resistance and the subsequent election of the Commune government on March 26th that constitute a political event for Badiou. Politics is the making of something out of nothing through the act of a collective subject, what he calls the “existence of an inexistent.”

It is this moment that is repeated—and very self-consciously repeated—in the Shanghai Commune in February 1967. This followed upon the intense power struggles within the Chinese Communist Party and Mao’s mobilization of the Red Guards against what he saw as the “revisionism” and bureaucratism of the regime. Although Badiou is very well aware that Mao ordered the dissolution of the Shanghai Commune and its replacement with a Revolutionary Committee controlled by the Party, it is this brief moment of the self-authorizing dictatorship of the proletariat that fascinates him.

What takes place in the Paris Commune is a moment of collective political self-determination. But, crucially, Badiou’s understanding of the Commune is freed from Lenin’s hugely influential critique in *State and Revolution*,¹³ where its failure is used to justify the Bolshevik seizure of state power in 1917. The same political logic is at work in the Shanghai Commune where, after having attempted to mobilize the masses politically, Mao criticizes the commune for “extreme anarchism” and being “most reactionary.” Badiou is acutely aware that the Cultural Revolution led to widespread barbarism, persecution, and disaster.

So, what is politics, then? It is what Badiou calls an “evanescent event,” the act by which a people declares itself into existence and seeks to follow through on that declaration. We might say that politics is the commune and only the commune. Badiou writes, very Platonically, “I

¹² *Id.* at 284.

¹³ V. I. LENIN, *THE STATE AND REVOLUTION* (Robert Service trans., Penguin Books 1992) (1918).

2008]

WHY BADIOU IS A ROUSSEAUIST

1933

believe this other world resides for us in the Commune.”¹⁴ It is this sudden transformation of the febrile sterility of the nothing of the world into a fecund something, this moment of radical rupture that obsesses Badiou, a seizure by thought in the event that is a seizure of power. Furthermore, this event doesn’t last. After seventy-two days, the Paris Commune was crushed by the military forces of the future first President of the Third Republic, Alphonse Thiers. An estimated 20,000 Parisians were slaughtered.

It is this brief moment of politics without party and state that was repeated in a slightly different register in May 1968. Understood biographically, the category of the event is Badiou’s attempt to make sense of the experience of novelty and rupture that accompanied the “events” of ’68. At its simplest, Badiou’s general question is: What is novelty? What is creation? How does newness come into the world? Understood politically, the event is that moment of novel, brief, local, communal rupture that breaks with a general situation of social injustice and inequality.

Compelling as I find Badiou’s understanding of politics, it is his taste for dictatorship that I find distasteful. Despite the liberal protestations of Hannah Arendt, I agree that the problem of politics is the formation of the general or generic will, of a popular front, what Marx called “an association of free human beings.” But in my view this should not lead to an apology for dictatorship. Why not embrace the anarchist politics that Badiou so steadfastly rejects, a politics that is also without party and at a distance from the state? My problem with Badiou’s politics is that behind his talk of discipline, even if it is no longer party discipline, there is an affectionate and, to my mind, misguided nostalgia for revolutionary violence. Seductive as it is, I find that Badiou’s conception of politics suffers from a heroism of the decision, a propaganda of the violent deed in all its deluded romance. It seems to me that in a world governed by the violence of military neo-liberalism, resistance must not take the form of a counter-violence—such is the neo-Leninist logic of al-Qaeda—but should be devoted to the prosecution and cultivation of peace. But peace is not passivity or a state of rest. It is a process, an activity, a hugely difficult practice.

For all the apparent optimism and robust affirmativeness of Badiou’s conception of philosophy, one might suspect that there is something deeply pessimistic at its heart, which again links Badiou to Rousseau. The formal conditions that define a true politics are so stringent and the examples given are so limited, that it is tempting to conclude that after the Commune and after 1968 any politics of the event has become impossible. But such a conclusion forgets where this

¹⁴ BADIOU, *POLEMICS*, *supra* note 1, at 288.

1934

CARDOZO LAW REVIEW

[Vol. 29:5]

article started, with Socrates wandering out of the unjust city to dream of another city in speech. Rousseau concludes his *Second Discourse*¹⁵ by showing that the development of social inequality culminates in a state of war between persons, tribes, nations and civilizations. It is difficult to disagree with such a diagnosis at the present time. In the face of such a state of war, the philosopher's dream of another city will always appear unrealistic and hopelessly utopian. To that extent, the impossibility of Badiou's politics is its greatest strength.

¹⁵ See JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU, DISCOURSE ON THE ORIGIN OF INEQUALITY AMONG MEN (1755).