

## *Why Not Badiou ?*

I : This Title

My question - which in the multiplicity of its possible meanings perfectly summarizes the angles which I should like to take into account in examining Alain Badiou's work - is, first of all, a psychoanalytical question.

“ Why not Badiou ? Can YOU see any good reasons ? ” The psychoanalyst, asking her question “ Why not (x) ? ”, summons a perceived censorship to expose its “ reasons ”, in order for the subject to take them out of their latency, to see whether they are all that “ good ”, all that “ compelling ”. Thus understood, the question of my title borrows what one might call the minimal content of liberalism inherent in psychoanalysis, bringing it to bear on our desire of reading Badiou, of opening our intellectual horizon to a voice that has not yet been heard yet.

“ Why not Badiou ? ” is, secondly, a rhetorical question, even an ironic one - a question that displays a certain post-socratic, post-liberal irony about relevance and indifference, originality and repetition, infinite craving and

finite supply, much in the style of Andy Warhol's pictorial quest of sameness. " Why not BADIOU ? (After all the others we have seen ...) "

-Taken in this (frankly alarming) sense, what exactly does the question confront us with ? It confronts us not with Badiou but with ourselves, namely with what is happening - and specifically : what is failing to happen - when and if an intellectual community constitutes itself through the fact of supposing Badiou as an/its author. It asks whether the reception of Badiou is perhaps no more than just one case in a repetitive liturgic scenario stipulating that, at regular intervals, a fresh *philosophus absconditus* is to be imported from Old Europe - much as if, inverting a well-known mythological motive, the youth of Athens would require to be sent a minotaurus from Crete every year, in order to devour him, ritually, in the appropriate ceremony of eucharistic solemnization. In other words, is there such a thing as a perfectly pre-established *Sitz-im-Leben* set up in advance, and existing, as it were, unbeknownst to its own personnel, as a location where the global English-speaking world community of critical intellectuals receives, singly and severally, the expositors of what it has categorised as " continental philosophy " ? Is there not, indeed, a division of labour at work, perfectly fitting into the scheme of rule and exception,

through which the liberal global world order, embodying the rule, has erected within itself, for critical theory, a “ park ”, sort of a secular and globalised equivalent of a monastic (cenobitic) monastery, constituting it as its own ever-already integrated non-liberal exception ?

A third reading of “ Why not Badiou ? ” would consist in taking the question quite literally, as a simply factual interrogation. In this reading, the question of the title, far removed from scrutinizing the readership’s subjectivity, far removed even from the here potentially relevant *logion* : “You are looking for a master ? Then you will get one ! ” (Lacan) looks for any points capable to substantiate and explain – why, precisely, not Badiou. Such points, more or less widely shared, sustainable, or peremptory, might exist, after all, potentially or otherwise. And if they do, then Badiou, his prodigious literary output, his idiosyncratical and nonetheless magisterial style, his indisputable achievement as a philosophical thinker, should surely be examined in the light of these points - rather than enshrined as a piece of evidence proving that “ politics is still possible ” (a proof to which a growing number of people is addicted, and which one sees most usually administered in the draconically formulaic style which haunts the English-

speaking reception of “ continental philosophy ” generally, as a result both of its unavowed foundational function and of its sparse availability in translation).

Fourthly, and finally, I would like to suggest that the question “ Why not Badiou ? ” can equally be understood as a preamble to the examination of the underlying, more essential interrogation “ Why Badiou ? ”. Reviewing rather than repeating must be the task, no matter its especial, inordinary difficulty in its application to Badiou. (Clearly, the reasons of this difficulty bear witness to Badiou’s genius, for a genius forecloses where others judge and reject; but foreclosure, leaving no traces or margins, tends to sabotage examination.) The political type of bond, especially the proto-socialist vocabulary of “ camarade ”, “ fraternité ”, etc., cannot, in any case, be substituted for theoretical scrutiny - a trap which Badiou himself avoids, to be sure, in spite of his outright systematic use of this vocabulary, declaring himself repeatedly and clearly for the division of politics and philosophy.

Starting with the fourth reading of the question of the title, I shall give a brief survey of Badiou’s work, some of his major themes and their outlines

– what remains inside, and what, outside. I shall in particular analyse examples from one of his works, which offers, I believe, manifold occasions for a favourable initial encounter with his thought (i.e. “ Le siècle ”, his last published book, of which I shall discuss two or three passages, translated for the occasion). The main part of my presentation will focus on the third way of understanding the question - and accordingly outline some aspects of the author’s political agenda and commitment - , as well as on the second way of understanding it, leading me to ask what type of action or performance are on offer in Badiou with regard to contemporary critical views within the philosophical thought especially of law.

## II : Elements for an Introduction

Badiou’s published works are dispersed among an unusual number of *disciplines* as well as of *genres*. As to *genres*, Badiou’s oeuvre includes, apart from books of philosophy, publications in militant periodicals (‘Le Perroquet’), articles in daily newspaper, novels, and plays – even an opera. As to *disciplines*, maths, as everyone knows, looms large among the many fields under scrutiny in Badiou’s writing, and so does history of philosophy, literary critique, and lacanian psychoanalysis, to name but a few. Noticeably absent among the fields Badiou considers worthwhile is law, and this for

excellent, fully convincing reasons, from his own vantage-point, reasons directly connected to the architectonics of his enterprise. Yet, whether critical lawyers, if they simply adopt Badiou's attitude to law without specifically reproblematising it, can claim to remain faithful to their enterprise as critical lawyers, is a wholly different issue, one which I think of capital importance and to which I would like to come back. His most recent book ('Le Siècle') pertains to the *discipline* of History, and to the *genre* of published lectures. The *status* of what Badiou says (or ...*does* in any single one of his writings) is unseparably linked to the boundary-trashing ubiquity he affects both genre-wise and discipline-wise – opening up to a whole gamut of possible worlds of political and literary intervention. This is not external to the sense of Badiou's very philosophy – it would be a mistake to understand Badiou's strictures relating to Philosophy-as-a-discipline as a denial of the multidimensionality of his own work. So much so indeed, that Badiou's remarks on any single topic always need to be related to the general philosophico-political configuration (the 'dice throw' - with one of his favourite poetic concepts) which animates each single intervention of his. Hegel's Lectures on Art in Greece cannot be read without side-looks on Hegel's key points and texts. This would fatally equal missing even the point he makes on Greek art, and everyone is keenly aware of this. I am not discussing whether the lofty comparison with Hegel can be sustained on philosophico-historical grounds. My point is wholly different. I would like to argue that, as soon as we consider the possibility that there might be, in Badiou, anything relevant for critical legal theory, we are forced to proceed in his case as we do in Hegel's, lest - given the complexity and individuality of Badiou's *œv* re (no less than

Hegel's, for on this point the comparison resists any doubt) - we expose ourselves to committing some rather basic blunder relating to the sense of Badiou's work. We cannot meaningfully use any bit of his oeuvre without formulating an overall account of Badiou's compassing "message" and "gesture" – his 'supplementation' of the situation.

And there is more. The question of supplementation and of its outcome, the additional ("excessive") element supplemented, inevitably entails that of a gesture of supplementing. Badiou has repeatedly confronted the issue, after linguists, speech-act theorists, epistemologists all working on the difficulty of "telling the dancer from the dance" in matters of discourse, of distinguishing between *presentation* and representation. Badiou's own work on the difference of these two levels and their mutual irreducibility is exemplary – and mostly mathematical (set-theory). Yet there is another two-story condition which he does not consider, but the power of which, or, to use another one of his favourite terms, the 'chicane' of which, he does not escape either, which is that of being part of a tradition, and even part of a genealogy. Genealogy plays no role in Badiou's work – so what for his reader?

### III : Mapping trouble zones

1) Platonism as “ meta-marxism ”.

2) Against Aristotle and the aristotelian gesture. The collusion between Aristotle’s ethical thought and legal reasoning. “ Nous vivons [today, in 2004] dans un dispositif aristotélien : il y a la nature, et [...] le droit, qui s’efforce tant bien que mal de corriger les excès de la nature... ” (249)

(“ We live in an aristotelian dispositive : there is nature, and, next to it, there is law, trying as best as it can to correct nature’s excesses. ”)

3) Producing the “ homme nouveau ”. “ Break history in Two ”.

Proclamations, revolts, manifestoes 193f. André Breton and the notion of the “ misérable prêtre ”.

4) The gesture of “ declaring ” as common shifter and origin of a generative procedure. the chief tension : between the gesture of declaration and determining a “rights” content. Activism (“ L’acte [est] seul à la mesure du présent réel... ” (215). “ The acte is the only measure of real present ” ). “ Il n’y a que des multiples procédures de vérité, des multiples séquence créatrices, et rien ne dispose entre elles une continuité. ”

5) The title and status of “ infinite thought ” in Badiou. P.46 on “ number ” vs. “ Number ”. Some remarks on the book published under the title “ Infinite Thought ”. Badiou and Zizek– any connections ?

6) Notion of the Party. Badiou’s “ white ecclesiology ”. Connections to B’s views on Politics, p.146ff. (“ Une forme singulière d’inséparation du ‘je’ et du ‘ nous’ . ”)

7) Radical antilegalism. “ juridisme ” is, as it was the case of his teacher, L. Althusser, Badiou’s decisive critical term (151, note). B.’s antilegalism : rigour and range.

8) “ Ethics ”.

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