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The Fate of the Generic: Marx with Badiou

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Alain Badiou opens one of his most recent books, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, with an affirmation that to many of his long-time readers may have come as a surprise: 'Here, without concerning myself with opponents and rivals, I would like to say that I too am a Marxist – naively, completely and so naturally that there is no need to reiterate it.' (Badiou, 2012b, p. 8) To readers of his older works this affirmation indeed may seem surprising insofar as Badiou devotes many pages in these works to a sustained reflection upon the undeniable crisis of Marxism. Such a reflection not only takes the form of a critique of Stalinism, marked by Badiou's notorious fidelity to Maoism, it also goes much further to declare a certain end of the referentiality of Marxist discourse in general. For example, in *Theory of the Subject*, which corresponds to Badiou's seminar between January 1975 and June 1979 and which, when it is finally published in 1982, constitutes a belated summa of his peculiar version of French Maoism, he writes: 'Yes, let us admit it without detours: Marxism is in crisis; Marxism is atomized. Past the impulse and creative scission of the 1960s, after the national liberation struggles and the cultural revolution, what we inherit in times of crisis and the imminent threat of war is a fragmentary and narrow assemblage of thought and action, caught in a labyrinth of ruins and survivals.' (Badiou, 2009, p. 182) Three years later, in *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Can Politics Be Thought?), he similarly and if possible even more forcefully restates the fact that, measured against the force of its beginnings in Marx himself, the crisis of Marxism constitutes 'the event of which we are the contemporaries' today. Thus, Badiou writes:

About the crisis of Marxism, we must say today that it is *complete*. This is not just an empirical observation. It is of the essence of the crisis as

crisis to unfold itself all the way to its last consequences. For Marxism, this means entering in the figure of its completion. And this, not just under the promise of the joint completion of a prehistory but on the contrary in the properly historical modality of its completion, which would turn Marxism into a fact, both ideological and practical, that is purely and simply expired. (Badiou, 1985, p. 25)

If from this point of view, by the early to mid-1980s, the crisis of Marxism appears to be both inevitable and complete, then surely more than a few readers familiar with those older writings will have been surprised to hear Badiou affirm his Marxist credentials in *The Rebirth of History* as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

On the other hand, to many newcomers or to readers less familiar with Badiou's overall thought, the affirmation about his being a Marxist 'naively, completely and so naturally that there is no need to reiterate it' will have appeared to be less surprising than unconvincing. This is so because to many of these readers, who in the same breath proudly present themselves as trustworthy authorities on the matter, this French Maoist is not really a Marxist or he is insufficiently Marxist. Of course, Badiou is the first to acknowledge the prevalence of this criticism, which is aimed with particular force at his recent renewal of the defence of the communist Idea, supposedly divorced from the economic and material realities of post-Fordist times. 'I am often criticized, including in the "camp" of potential political friends, for not taking account of the characteristics of contemporary capitalism, for not offering a "Marxist analysis" of it. Consequently, for me communism is an ethereal idea; at the end of the day, I am allegedly an idealist without any anchorage in reality' (Badiou, 2012b, p. 7). Ironically, this is true even of Badiou's analysis of the age of riots in *The Rebirth of History*, which was quickly taken to task by reviewers for failing to grasp, among other things, the historical links between the riots and the restructuring of capital that is happening in the current cycle of financialisation and post-Fordist flexibilisation (see, in particular, Bernes and Clover, 2012; see also the slightly more sympathetic reviews by Smith, 2012 and, in the same publication, Brown, 2012).

Whether they come from the left or the right, the problem with all such summary trials and prompt condemnations of Badiou's insufficiency as a Marxist is that they presume to know in advance the answer to the question What is Marxism? But not only may the answer be completely different from the one that the target of these criticisms might give; even the question is posed differently. For Badiou, this question is not

theoretical but practical; it is not philosophical but political. Beyond the naive, spontaneous and nowadays entirely naturalised principle of a certain dominance of the economic ('It's the economy, stupid!'), Marxism always means political Marxism for Badiou. Therefore, it is also as a militant political discourse that Marxism must be periodised, criticised, rectified and, if necessary, destroyed and recomposed; namely, on the basis of the obstacles it encountered, the solutions it proposed and the problems that it left unresolved to this day:

Genuine Marxism, which is identified with rational political struggle for an egalitarian organization of society, doubtless began around 1848 with Marx and Engels. But it made progress thereafter, with Lenin, Mao and a few others. I was brought up on these historical and theoretical teachings. I believe I am well aware of the problems that have been resolved, and which it is pointless to start reinvestigating; and of the problems that remain outstanding, and which require of us radical rectification and strenuous invention. (Badiou, 2012b, p. 8)

It thus turns out that many of the objections raised against Badiou for being insufficiently Marxist depend on a prior definition of Marxism that is foreign to Badiou's own. Whether they point to Marxism as the science of history, as the critique of political economy or as the philosophy of dialectical materialism, such objections fail to take into account the fact that for Badiou and his comrades in the different organisations that he helped found, Marxism has no real existence other than as a militant discourse of political subjectivity. Paul Sandevince (pseudonym for Sylvain Lazarus), in the brochure *Qu'est-ce qu'une politique marxiste?* (What Is a Marxist Politics?) published by the Maoist organisation of the UCFML (Union of French Marxist-Leninist Communists), in which both he and Badiou were active until the early 1980s, sums up this significance with his usual concision: 'Marxism is not a doctrine, whether philosophical or economical. Marxism is the politics of the proletariat in its actuality. [...] Marxism is the politics of communism' (Sandevince, 1978, p. 6; for a more detailed account of Badiou's Maoism, see chs 2 and 3 in Bosteels, 2011).

With regard to the political definition of Marxism, at least, there has been no significant change in Badiou's point of view. Already in the early Maoist pamphlet *Théorie de la contradiction* (Theory of Contradiction) from the mid-1970s, he writes: 'We must conceive of Marxism as the accumulated wisdom of popular revolutions, the reason they engender,

and the fixation and precision of their target' (Badiou, 1975, p. 16). Similarly, in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou asks about the nature of Marxism as a science of history before rejecting this hypothesis, which even Marx and Engels (1976, pp. 303–4) had put under erasure in their manuscript for *The German Ideology*: 'We know only a single science, the science of history. One can look at history from two sides and divide it into the history of nature and the history of men. The two sides are, however, inseparable; the history of nature and the history of men are dependent on each other so long as men exist.' Against this scientificist view, still dear to his old mentor Louis Althusser, Badiou in *Theory of the Subject* underlines once again the militant political nature of genuine Marxism: 'Science of history? *Marxism is the discourse through which the proletariat supports itself as subject. We must never let go of this idea.*' (Badiou, 2009, p. 44) And in *Peut-on penser la politique?* the same idea appears again: 'Marxism is not a doctrine. It is the name of the One for a constituted network of political practices.' And again: 'Marxism in no way constitutes a grand narrative. Marxism is the consistency of a political subject, of a heterogeneous political capacity' (Badiou, 1985, pp. 52, 53). As a matter of fact, in support of this militant understanding of Marxism, we could go on citing nearly any text from any period of his work in which Badiou refers to the discourse that Marx and Engels inaugurated with *The Communist Manifesto*.

There is no longer anything surprising, then, if in *The Rebirth of History* we find what is only the latest in a long series of statements about the nature of Marxism as the living knowledge and militant discourse of communist political subjectivity:

Any living knowledge is made up of problems, which have been or must be constructed or reconstructed, not of repetitive descriptions. Marxism is no exception to this. It is neither a branch of economics (theory of the relations of production), nor a branch of sociology (objective description of 'social reality'), nor a philosophy (a dialectical conceptualization of contradictions). It is, let us reiterate, the organized knowledge of the political means required to undo existing society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is 'communism'. (Badiou, 2012b, pp. 8–9)

This privileging of the political over the critical or of the prescriptive over the descriptive can be seen even in the preferred choices of texts from the canon. Rather than concentrating on the discovery of a new, structural

type of causality in *Capital* or even, for that matter, in the *Grundrisse* as the dynamic centre of Marxian thought, Badiou always favours the more historical and interventionist writings, such as Marx's *The Civil War in France*, Engels's *The Peasant Revolt in Germany*, Lenin's *What Is to Be Done?* and Mao's *Problems of Strategy in China's Revolutionary War*, in addition to the all too obvious choice of *The Communist Manifesto*. Marxism, Leninism and Maoism are thus tied to the principal episodes in the periodisation of revolutionary activity:

The great stages of Marxism are punctuated by the proletarian revolutions and, precisely, the great Marxists are those who have directed and synthesized the findings of the theory, ideology and politics of the proletariat in the light of these same revolutions: Marx and Engels for the Paris Commune, Lenin and Stalin for the October Revolution, Mao Zedong for the Cultural Revolution. (UCFML, 1976, p. 3)

In particular, without wanting to submit the canonical texts for each of these sequences to a nostalgic reconstruction, for Badiou and his fellow militants, to be a Marxist today means first and foremost to take cognisance not of the solutions so much as of the problems left unsolved during the last revolutionary sequence from the twentieth century, the one of the Cultural Revolution that between 1966 and 1976 was marked by the name of Mao Zedong. One thus necessarily must remain a Marxist even or especially when it comes to pushing the unresolved problems all the way to a destruction and recomposition of Marxism itself. 'What does it mean to be a Marxist today?' Badiou asks in *Peut-on penser la politique?* 'It means to be someone who stands in a position of the subject in the destruction of Marxism, who pronounces what must die in an immanent way, and who thus dies in person, disposing of this death as the cause of a recomposition of politics' (Badiou, 1985, p. 55).

By contrast, what Badiou seems to have in mind when he affirms his naive and spontaneous adherence to Marxism in *The Rebirth of History* is actually limited to being little more than expedited praise for the analytical strengths of Marx's original diagnosis in *Capital*. This is a diagnosis that today, in the midst of a rampant worldwide crisis, may well be truer than it was a century and a half ago: 'Basically, today's world is exactly the one which, in a brilliant anticipation, a kind of true science fiction, Marx heralded as the full unfolding of the irrational and, in truth, monstrous potentialities of capitalism' (Badiou, 2012b, p. 12). For Badiou, though, it has become ever more painfully evident that the essence of Marxism is not analytical but political. Not only does

he consider communist politics to be of the order of a wager, essentially disjoined from the critique of political economy – ‘We must wager on communist politics, you will never deduce it from Capital’ – but also in *Peut-on penser la politique?* he goes so far as to suggest that what marks a defeatist stance, even or especially when it finds shelter and couches itself in the Marxological orthodoxy of the university discourse, is the witting or unwitting inability to separate one from the other: ‘For me, an intrapolitical defeat is the inability of an intervention to disjoin the political from the analytical. To fail means not to interrupt a given state of certainty’ (Badiou, 1985, pp. 87, 104).

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Marxism in Badiou’s understanding, in sum, is neither the science of history that is inseparably human and natural nor the dialectical philosophy that puts Hegel back on his feet; it is neither a critique of classical or bourgeois political economy nor an objective sociological description of the misery of the world with an underlying anthropology of the true nature of humanity as generic species-being. Instead, it is or was a militant intervening discourse to sustain the real movement of communism.

Is or was? There clearly exists some ambivalence in this regard, as is only to be expected in the case of a discourse that constantly comes under the sway of the trials and tribulations of the specific conjuncture in which it intervenes. If Marxism in effect is neither an objective science nor a perennial philosophy but an intervening discourse of the political subject, then the historical referents and conceptual operators of this discourse can be expected to undergo major changes as well. Marx, Lenin and Mao – to limit ourselves to the only names systematically summoned by Badiou – are far from presenting a homogeneous doctrine that would go by the official name of Marxism or Marxism-Leninism, to be protected by the guardians of orthodoxy from all kinds of ideological deviations. To the contrary, all efforts to safeguard such a doctrine are symptoms of academic conservatism at best and dogmatic sclerosis at worst due to the fundamental inconsistency of its object: ‘To put it bluntly, *Marxism doesn’t exist*’, because ‘between Marx and Lenin there is rupture and foundation rather than continuity and development. Equally, there is rupture between Stalin and Lenin, and between Mao and Stalin’ (Badiou, 2005, p. 58).

As far as the breaks and discontinuities between Marx, Lenin and Mao are concerned, Badiou sometimes adopts another of Sylvain Lazarus’s arguments, which refers precisely to the changing roles of history and

politics, of the relations between the so-called objective and the subjective factors from one figure to the next. For the author of *Capital*, there thus would exist a close union or fusion between history and politics, enabling a certain transitivity between the working class as a social category and the proletariat as an organisational operator devoid of all substance; for the author of *What Is to Be Done?*, the need for a vanguard party already hints at a symptomatic gap between social being and consciousness or between the class in itself and the class for itself; and for the author of 'On Contradiction' and 'On Practice', who is also, not coincidentally, responsible for a 'Critique of Stalin's *Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR*', politics is put in the command post as a relatively autonomous practice or instance, whereas history, instead of serving as an external referent at the level of social being, becomes absorbed into politics as the name for the latter's entirely contingent unfolding according to a periodisation of its own.¹

Along similar lines, over the course of the past two or three decades, Badiou has increasingly come to disjoin the analytical role of Marxism from the political one. As a diagnostic, Marx's critique of political economy may well be more valid today than yesterday, but this does not help the militant actors in the political riots and uprisings of our time to devise the appropriate tactics and strategies for intervention. Something has entered into a profound crisis in the articulation between these two aspects or logics of Marxism, which I have called the analytical and the political and which others call the logic of history and the logic of struggle, supposedly marked by an incommensurability overcome only by the imaginary glue of communism (see Dardot and Laval, 2012).

In other words, Badiou is less and less convinced that we can understand politics, like the development of religion, 'through history, in and with history', as the early Marx said in *The Holy Family*, in a phrase often repeated by the late Daniel Bensaïd (Marx and Engels, 1975, p. 109; see also Bensaïd, 2006). This is so because, for the author of *Being and Event*, politics is entirely of the order of the event, which cannot be understood unless we put to the side all mere facts and opinions about facts. 'The paradox of the endeavor in which we are engaged by the retreat of the political is the following: since the determination of the essence of politics cannot be guaranteed by structure (inconsistency of sets, delinking) or by sense (History does not add up to a totality), its only point of reference is the event' we can read already in *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Badiou, 1985, p. 67). And along the same lines, Badiou will increasingly come to see a political intervention – like art, mathematics and love as the other three domains in which events can take place – as

self-referential and authorised only by itself. This is especially clear in the period from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, roughly from *Being and Event* to *Metapolitics*, when the antihistoricist and antidialectical impetus of Badiou's work is effectively at its peak. But many commentators perceive a similar stance in the return to communism proposed in *The Communist Hypothesis* and *The Rebirth of History*. The potential drawbacks rightly or wrongly associated with this position should be obvious enough: a seemingly ethereal aloofness, a privileging of the philosopher-intellectual to the detriment of the masses in revolt and, in general, a separation of praxis and Idea under the openly accepted philosophical guardianship of Plato rather than Marx. Conversely, the potential risks involved in the opposite position should be no less evident: an anti-intellectual disdain for theory in favour of the pedagogy of the deed, a tendency to explain away the emergence of autonomous political tactics on the basis of the historical cycles and crises of the capitalist world system and, in general, a reduction of the political or interventionist Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* or *The Civil War in France* to the more analytical or systemic Marx of *Capital*, with or without the supplement of the *Grundrisse*.

However, the perceived shift in the trajectory of Badiou's evaluation of Marxism as a militant discourse is less radical than appears at first sight. Even as he will come to interpret the sense or meaning of the term 'history' differently, Badiou in fact has always defended the thesis that politics – while necessarily *anchored* or *rooted* in history – cannot be *inferred* or *deduced* from history alone. This is why all events of politics are necessarily forced events.

Let us consider, for example, how in *Theory of the Subject* Badiou attempts to devise a dialectical articulation between history and politics, mapped onto the dialectic of productive masses and partisan class. 'Class, apprehended according to the dialectical division of its dialecticity, means partisan political action anchored in the productive historicity of the masses', he claims. 'The whole point is to know how all this works together, because it is this working together that *is* class. This entails nothing less than to make the rectifiable singularity of politics rise up in the real movement of history' (Badiou, 2009, p. 27). It is true that Badiou subsequently comes to abandon this view of the transitivity or, at the very least, the dialectical working together of history and politics or of masses and classes organised through partisan action. Thus, in *Peut-on penser la politique?*, intransitivity becomes the new key in determining the essence of politics, which marks the point of the real even of the beginning of Marx's

discourse, which only the Marxist critique of political economy ended up fixating into a fiction:

What should have been a strategy of the event, a hypothesis about the hysterias of the social, an organ for the cut-interpretation, a courage of chance, has finally been presented, by way of the economy, as giving a convenient measure of social relationships. Thus, Marxism was destroyed by its own history, which is that of its fixation, with an *x*, the history of its fixation into the philosopheme of the political. (Badiou, 1985, p. 14)²

Between *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*, with *Peut-on penser la politique?* serving as a pivotal transition, the old Marxist paradigm of base and superstructure, of forces and relations of production and, in militant terms, of the dialectic of masses, classes, party and state is thus abandoned in favour of the seemingly disparate paradigm of situation, intervention, event, fidelity, subject and truth, which we have come to associate with Badiou's own philosophy.

Yet this does not mean that Badiou henceforth will abandon Marx's dialectic and forgo the category of history altogether. In fact, in *Peut-on penser la politique?* he proposes that the new vocabulary remain that of the dialectic: 'I state that the concepts of event, structure, intervention, and fidelity are the very concepts of the dialectic, provided the latter is not reduced to the flat image, which was already inadequate for Hegel, of totalisation and the labour of the negative' (Badiou, 1985, p. 84).³ And, as recently as in *The Rebirth of History*, he revisits much of the grammar of the articulation in question; however, now the history in which all politics is said to be 'anchored' or 'rooted' no longer refers to objective factors but instead becomes wholly internal to the subjective process of sustaining a political event as such. For the post-Marxist or post-Maoist in Badiou, the point is no longer to politicise history but to historicise politics. If there is a rebirth or reawakening of history, it is no longer based in the objective history of class struggle but in the becoming-historical of certain spontaneous revolts and uprisings and in the making-political of those historical riots. Henceforth, in other words, all there is to the dialectic, if this is still what we want to call the theory of the event, is an immanent periodisation of spontaneous riot, historical movement and political organisation. And so the new version of the old question asked in *Theory of the Subject* in terms of masses and class becomes the following one in *The Rebirth of History*: 'How are we to inscribe politically, as active materiality under the sign of the Idea, a

reawakening of History?', particularly if such inscriptions are no longer socially predetermined but instead both rare and contingent: 'Let us simply note that if every political truth is rooted in a massive popular event, it nevertheless cannot be said that it is reducible to it' (Badiou, 2012b, pp. 67, 89; for Badiou's changing views of history and politics, see also chs 3 and 7 in Bosteels, 2011).

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The militant lesson that Badiou draws from the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement in the USA and, for example, the *indignados* of Puerta del Sol is that the philosopher should put an ear to the ground to listen to the rumble of massive popular events while avoiding at all costs becoming the police or judge of history – or, even worse, helping the existing cops or judges by becoming a snitch: 'For now, though, the philosopher will be allowed to lend an ear to the signal, rather than rushing to the police station.'⁴ Philosophy (or what I prefer to call theory) is neither a waiting room in the police station nor a world-historical tribunal from which to judge everything and nothing but an activity of thought under the condition of events that are partially beyond its control. Throughout *The Rebirth of History*, Badiou repeats a number of expressions to make sure that philosophy both lets itself be conditioned by and learns from the riots as the actually happening political events of our time. Thus, in French, he most often uses the expression *être à l'école de*, meaning 'to learn from' or, literally, 'to be schooled by' the riots and uprisings of the last decade – exactly in the same way (or so it seems) as, in the 1970s, it was common usage among French Maoists to rely on this expression to refer to the task of theory (the reference to philosophy conversely being far less common at the time) in the face of the events of the 'red years' that took their inspiration from the Cultural Revolution. In any case, we should not in turn rush to judgement by imputing to the philosopher a desire for teaching a lesson to the participants in the riots. Doing so would mean, ironically, turning oneself into a mirror image of the philosopher rushing to the police station: instead of blaming the rioters for their lack of an Idea, we would quickly and somewhat predictably blame the philosopher for his excessive confidence in the Idea. Any day now I picture somebody along these lines writing a book called *Badiou's Lesson*, echoing and extending Jacques Rancière's harsh attack on the master thinker in *Althusser's Lesson*. But while in *The Rebirth of History* Badiou does indeed speak of 'lessons', the fact of the matter is that these are to be modestly *learned from* the rioters and not magisterially *taught to* them, very much in the same way that in an earlier book,

The Century, Badiou presents a series of 'lessons' taught *by* rather than *to* the artistic, political and psychoanalytic experimenters of the twentieth century. 'In the condition of political misery that has been ours for three decades, is it not obvious that it is we who have everything to learn from the current popular uprisings?' Badiou also asks in an article written for *Le Monde* with regard to the events of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt and reprinted in *The Rebirth of History*. 'Yes, we must be the pupils [écoliers] of these movements, not their stupid teachers' (Badiou, 2012b, pp. 106–7).

Accusations against the philosopher's overreaching ambitions with regard to the recent riots depend very much on an unspoken and profoundly un-Marxist presupposition that these accusers attribute to Badiou's recent work on communism; namely, the presupposition that it belongs to the philosopher and to the philosopher alone to formulate, develop and propagate what he calls the Idea, without which there could be no reawakening of History. This would place the rioters in the position of impatient schoolchildren with a likely attention deficit disorder having to wait for the master's class about the role of the Idea. The latter, then, would be the philosopher's brainchild with which to shepherd the rioters and looters around the imposed resurgence of communism. Similarly, certain readers will have concluded from the title of another of Badiou's recent books, *Philosophy for Militants*, that political militancy seems to be dependent on the prior development of theoretical work, which would have to be performed by the professional philosopher. This, too, would lead us straight back into a form of speculative idealism along the lines of how Marx, in his 1873 postface to the second German edition of *Capital*, reproaches Hegel for placing the driving motor of history in the realm of the Idea: 'For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of "the Idea", is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea' (Marx, 1976a, p. 102). However, while there is certainly no shortage of vagueness surrounding the notion of the Idea as brandished by Badiou, neither *The Communist Hypothesis* nor *The Rebirth of History* bears out the presupposition that elaborating this notion of the Idea would be the exclusive purview of the professional philosopher. To the contrary, if there is one presupposition consistently at work in all of Badiou's writings on the political condition, it is the notion that politics is an active and generic form of thought in its own right with its own ideas, thoughts, watchwords and scripts. And whereas Marx speaks in this regard about the role of praxis in overcoming the inertia of the

traditional opposition between theory and practice, Badiou prefers to describe politics as a *pensée-faire*, a collective and generic ‘thought-practice’ or ‘thinking-doing’, which is not in need of the philosopher to know either what it is or what is to be done. ‘If politics is the practice of a thought in an absolutely self-sufficient register’, Badiou writes in *Metapolitics*, ‘then we can say that philosophy’s task is to seize the conditions for the practice of thought within this singular register known as politics’ (Badiou, 2005, pp. 86–7).

Even the call to ensure that an Idea be rooted in the historical events that mark the present age of riots and uprisings so as to give them greater durability and expansiveness should not be treated as the symptom of a philosopher’s unsavoury desire for hegemony over the future of politics. For, aside from the fact that from the materialist principle that it is philosophy that is conditioned by politics and not the other way around, part of this call furthermore stems very much from the opposite desire; namely, the wish for politics to bring about a situation in which everyone can be a philosopher. ‘Of course, you will recognise in this a Platonic desire, though expanded from the aristocracy of the guardians to the popular collective in its entirety’, Badiou writes in *Philosophy for Militants*. ‘This wish could be expressed as follows: wherever a human collective is working in the direction of equality, the conditions are met for everyone to be a philosopher’ (Badiou, 2012a, p. 37).⁵ And so, not only are ideas and thoughts immanent to actual political struggles, but even the communist Idea, for all its seemingly glacial Platonism or speculative Hegelianism, can be translated as the wish for politics to create a generic place in which rioters and philosophers – like the hunter, fisherman, herdsman and critic in the (still overly masculine and pastoral) version of communist society famously prefigured in *The German Ideology* – become gathered into a single figure, perhaps even without having to split their time into morning, afternoon, evening and after-dinner activities, as was still the case for Marx and Engels. ‘In this sense’, writes Badiou, ‘all emancipatory politics contains for philosophy, whether visible or invisible, the watchword that brings about the actuality of universality – namely, if all are together, then all are communists! And if all are communists, then all are philosophers!’ (Badiou, 2012a, p. 38).⁶ According to this formulation, the time may not yet seem ripe for the possibility of the universal sharing of philosophy to become a reality. Still, instead of setting our expectant eyes on the distant future of a state of affairs that would be yet to come, we could also read this

desire for everyone to become a philosopher as something that already becomes actualised in every instance of collective struggle, no matter how local or short lived it may well turn out to be. In this sense, once again, the argument would be in favour of politics as a generic thought-practice in which theoretical ideas are not transcendent but immanent to the actions and initiatives that are their only practical existence. Of course, what remains to be seen is whether and to what extent Badiou himself, in recent works such as *The Rebirth of History* and *The Communist Hypothesis*, facilitates such an understanding of politics as immanent thought-practice.

In fact, we can easily see how the notion of thoughts or ideas appears as if redoubled in this context. There are, first, the ideas and thoughts inherent in any political practice but then, second, the ideas and thoughts that would belong to philosophy or theory, conditioned by actually existing politics. This redoubling of the category of thought not only goes to the heart of the problem about the relation between events and concepts: where or at which level, for example, should we locate the category of what Badiou calls the Idea? But what is more, this redoubling of thought also begs the question of the place of the third category, namely history, in the articulation between philosophy and politics.

In this last regard, we face a decision between two basic positions: either we maintain the necessity of a double occurrence of thought, first within politics and then within philosophy, or else we strive as much as possible to dissipate such reduplication in the name of strict historical immanence or what Marx in the 'Theses on Feuerbach' calls the 'earthliness' or 'this-sidedness' of practical activity, with the likely result of a gradual or axiomatic withering away of philosophy as a separate activity. If Badiou is reluctant to accept the last position as a simple given or self-evident point of departure, it may very well correspond to the ultimate aim of his entire philosophy, which for this reason always harbours certain antiphilosophical elements as well. Like the Idea, then, truths are immanent to the situation in which they are worked out. 'A truth is something that exists in its active process, which manifests itself, as truth, in different circumstances marked by this process,' Badiou also writes in *The Rebirth of History*. 'Truths are not prior to political processes; there is no question of confirming or applying them. Truths are reality itself, as a process of production of political novelties, political sequences, political revolutions, and so forth.' (Badiou, 2012b, p. 87) Ideas, too, would be part of the ongoing political processes. Rather than

operating at a theoretically superior level, they would be active on the ground or at the grassroots level in the militant rationality of the struggles themselves.

On the other hand, just as the notion of truths in the systematic elaboration of this philosophy always seems to escape and exceed the circumstantial grip of the worlds in which they are uttered and embodied, Badiou is equally adamant about always drawing a clear line of demarcation between philosophy and the various non-philosophical procedures – among them politics – in which events can take place and truths can be produced. And, while such a line of demarcation is meant as a lesson in restraint to keep philosophy from making the disastrous claim that it can be a politics (or a science or an art) in its own right, it is also true that this insistence runs counter to the wish to dissolve the heterogeneity between politics and philosophy into a single thought-practice whose unity would be guaranteed by the mediating term of history as the sole realm of all human activities.

In the end, the simplest way of summarising what Marx and Badiou have in common is to consider both as thinkers of the generic. The location of this genericity is certainly different – with the young Marx, especially, situating the generic on the side of human being as a collective entity or species-being and Badiou, by contrast, assigning the generic to being qua being as revealed in a singular truth procedure. However, just as for Marx the collective or communal nature of the human being should not be seen as an anthropological given but as an axiomatic presupposition enacted in the here and now of concrete struggles, so, too, must we avoid the false impression that Badiou's ontology would depend on a phenomenological gift or donation as the appearing of pure being in the miracle of an event. Instead, both Marx and Badiou are versions of a materialist and dialectical understanding of the link – which is at the same time a delinking – between being, truth, event and the subject. The author of *Being and Event* merely pushes the deconstruction of being all the way to the point, marked as a symptomatic site, where the impasse of being presupposes and at the same time coincides with the pass of the subject. This means that in the end, generic thought-practices such as those of politics, which organise a material fidelity to the chance occurrence of an event, can still be considered instances of what Marx, in his 'Theses on Feuerbach', calls revolutionary practice or praxis – even if for Badiou the age of revolutions definitively ended with the end of the Cultural Revolution: 'The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*' (Marx, 1976b, p. 4).

Notes

1. Aside from the texts collected in Lazarus, 2013, see also Lazarus, 1992, an anonymous text most likely authored by Lazarus and available in English as Lazarus, 2005. For Badiou's critical rejoinder to the work of Lazarus, see ch. 2 in Badiou, 2005.
2. The best account of the destruction or deconstruction of Marxism that occurs in the mid-1980s in Badiou's work can be found in two chapters written by Alberto Toscano (Toscano, 2004; 2007). For a recent attempt to put the critique of political economy back into the evaluation of Badiou's Maoism via the UCFML, see Walker, 2012.
3. Before the systematic account in Bosteels, 2011, I discussed the role of the dialectic in Badiou's philosophy in Bosteels, 2004. On the comparison with Hegel, see Bosteels, 2010.
4. In French this sentence reads as follows: 'Dans l'instant toutefois, on permettra au philosophe de prêter l'oreille au signal, plutôt que de se précipiter au commissariat.' (Badiou, 2011, p. 37) Gregory Elliott's translation is less evocative of the philosopher as a tattletale who hastens to tell on the rioters in the police station: 'For now, however, a philosopher will be permitted to lend an ear to the signal rather than rushing to judgement.' (Badiou, 2012b, p. 21)
5. Badiou does not elaborate on the Gramscian undertones of this formulation. In fact, to my knowledge Antonio Gramsci is conspicuously absent from all of Badiou's writings.
6. Compare with *The German Ideology*: '[I]n communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic' (Marx and Engels, 1976, p. 47).

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