



ALAIN BADIOU

*Translated and with an Introduction  
by Bruno Bosteels*

Can Politics Be Thought ?





# Can Politics Be Thought?

FOLLOWED BY

# Of an Obscure Disaster

*On the End of the Truth of the State*

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Translated and with an introduction

by Bruno Bosteels

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# Translator's Introduction

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BRUNO BOSTEELS

The two texts translated in this volume constitute Alain Badiou's most elaborate response to the crisis of Marxism before and after the collapse of "really existing socialism" in the Soviet bloc. This response seeks to be faithful to the original impulse behind Marx's thought, whose novelty would still remain to be reassembled all the while acknowledging that the old Marxism is dead. Instead of being merely the inert object of the crisis of Marxism, Badiou proposes that we should be its active subject: the subject of the destruction and recomposition of Marx's legacy in terms of its lessons for thinking emancipatory politics today. Hence the title question, *Peut-on penser la politique?*, the ambivalence of which becomes even more pronounced in English: Can politics be thought? This question can be heard as meaning not only Can we think politics? Is politics thinkable? But also, in line with Badiou's own view of the relation

between politics and philosophy, Can politics be a form of thought in its own right, if by this we understand the hypothesis of an egalitarian practice that produces universal truths about the possibility for collective existence today?

What I propose to do in this translator's introduction, then, is to answer two basic questions that may help the reader understand the place of *Can Politics Be Thought?* and *Of an Obscure Disaster: On the End of the Truth of the State* within the trajectory of Badiou's philosophy: first, what should we take to be Badiou's understanding of Marxism; and, second, to what extent does the crisis of Marxism introduce a necessary break or reorientation, if there is any to begin with, in this philosopher's overall work?<sup>1</sup>

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We can begin answering the first of these questions by considering Badiou's recent book, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprising*, which opens with an affirmation that to many of his readers will 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."<sup>2</sup> To readers of his older works, in particular, this affirmation may indeed seem surprising, insofar as Badiou devotes dozens of pages in these works to a sustained reflection upon the complete crisis of Marxism. Such a reflection not only takes the form of a critique of Stalinism; it also goes much further and declares an end to the referential value of Marxist discourse in general.

For instance, in *Theory of the Subject*, which corresponds to Badiou's seminar between January 1975 and June 1979 and which, upon its publication in 1982, constitutes a belated grand summa of his version of French Maoism, he exclaims, "Yes, let's admit it without beating around the bushes: Marxism is in crisis and atomized. Past the élan and creative scission of the sixties, past the national liberation struggles and the cultural revolution, we inherit, in times of crisis and the threat of war, a fragmentary and narrow disposition of thought and action, caught in a labyrinth of ruins and surviv-

als.”<sup>3</sup> Three years later, in *Can Politics Be Thought?*, Badiou similarly and if possible even more forcefully restates the fact that, measured against the force of its beginning in Marx himself, the crisis of Marxism constitutes the dominant event by which the contemporaneity of thought must be measured. If, from this point of view, the crisis of Marxism appears to be both complete and inescapable, then surely more than a few readers familiar with Badiou’s older writings will have raised their eyebrows upon hearing him affirm his Marxist credentials in *The Rebirth of History* as though this were the most natural thing in the world.

To readers less familiar with Badiou’s overall thought, on the other hand, the affirmation about his being a Marxist will have appeared to be less surprising than unconvincing. This is because to many of these readers, who in the next breath rarely fail to present themselves as trustworthy authorities on the matter, this longtime Maoist cannot really be seen as a proper Marxist. Badiou himself is the first to acknowledge the prevalence of this criticism, which takes aim with particular force at his recent renewal of the communist Idea for being divorced from the economic and material realities of our 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.”<sup>4</sup> Whether they come from the left or the right, the problem with all such summary trials and condemnations of Badiou’s insufficiency as a Marxist is that they presume to know in advance the answer to the question What is Marxism? However, not only is the answer completely different, but even the question is posed differently in each case.

For Badiou, the question of what constitutes Marxism is not philosophical but political. Beyond the naïve, spontaneous, and nowadays entirely naturalized principle of a certain dominance of the economy, Marxism always means political Marxism for Badiou. Therefore it is also as a militant political discourse that Marxism



must be periodized, criticized, and, if need be, destroyed and re-composed, based on the obstacles it encountered, the solutions it proposed, and the problems 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.<sup>5</sup>

Considered in this light, it turns out that many of the objections raised against the author of *The Communist Hypothesis* for being insufficiently Marxist depend on a prior definition of Marxism that is foreign to Badiou's own. Whether they view Marxism primarily 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 organizations that he helped found, Marxism has no real existence other than as a militant discourse of political subjectivity. One of these friends, Paul Sandevince (a.k.a. Sylvain Lazarus), in the brochure *What Is a Marxist Politics?* published by the Maoist organization of the Union of French Marxist-Leninist Communists (UCFML), 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," and later: "Marxism is the politics of communism."<sup>6</sup>

With regard to this political definition of Marxism, there has been no significant change in Badiou's point of view. Already in the early Maoist pamphlet *Theory of Contradiction*, which dates back to the mid-1970s, he had written, "We must conceive of Marxism as the accumulated wisdom of popular revolutions, the reason they

engender, and the fixation and precision of their target.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, against the scientific view still dear to his old mentor Louis Althusser, Badiou in *Theory of the Subject* once more underlines the militant political nature of Marxism: “Science of history? *Marxism is the discourse through which the proletariat supports itself as subject.* We must never let go of this idea.”<sup>8</sup> And it is also this same idea that will appear in the pages of *Can Politics Be Thought?* In fact to support the militant understanding of Marxism, we could cite almost 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, then, no longer anything surprising 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.”<sup>9</sup>

This privileging of the political over the analytical, of the militant over the critical, or of the prescriptive over the descriptive, can be seen even in the preferred choice of texts from the Marxist canon. Rather than concentrating, as Althusser did, on the discovery of a new, structural type of causality in *Capital*, or even, in the manner of Antonio Negri, on the *Grundrisse* as the dynamic center of Marxian thought, Badiou always favors the 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.* Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism are thus tied to different episodes in an internal periodization 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.<sup>10</sup>

Without wanting to submit the canonical texts for each of these sequences to a nostalgic reconstruction going straight to the mausoleum or wax museum of great dead leaders, for Badiou to be a Marxist today means first and foremost to take cognizance not of the solutions so much as of the problems left unsolved during the last revolutionary sequence from the twentieth century, that of the Cultural Revolution in China, which between 1966 and 1976 was marked by the name of Mao Zedong. One necessarily must remain a Marxist even when it comes to pushing the unsolved problems all the way to the destruction and recomposition of Marxism itself.

By contrast, what Badiou seems to have in mind when he affirms his spontaneous adherence to Marxism in *The Rebirth of History* is little more than expedited praise for the analytical strengths of Marx's diagnostic of the exploitation of labor in *Capital*. This is a diagnostic that today, in the context of worldwide turmoil and 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."<sup>11</sup> For Badiou, though, it has become ever more painfully evident that the essence of Marxism is not analytical but militant. Not only does he consider communist politics to be a wager essentially disjoined from the critique of political economy, but he goes so far as to suggest that what defines a defeatist stance—even or especially

when it finds shelter in the Marxological orthodoxy of the university discourse—is the inability to separate one from the other.

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

Is or was? Great ambivalence surrounds this issue, as is to be expected in a discourse that constantly comes under the sway of the specific conjunctures in which it intervenes. If Marxism is neither an objective science nor a systematic philosophy but an intervening discourse of the political subject, 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 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 the threat 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*,” Badiou will go on to declare in the early to mid-1990s, 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.”<sup>12</sup>

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 to the changing roles of history and politics, or of the relations between the so-called objective and subjective factors. For the author of *Capital*, there thus would exist a close union or fusion between history and politics, enabling a kind of transitivity between the working class as a social category and the proletariat as an organizational operator devoid of all sub-

stance; for the author of *What Is to Be Done?* the need for a vanguard party hints at a symptomatic gap that needs to be bridged 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, not coincidentally, also 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, far from serving as an external referent at the level of social being, becomes entirely absorbed into politics as the name for the latter’s contingent unfolding according to a periodization all of its own.<sup>13</sup>

Along similar lines, Badiou has increasingly come to disjoin the analytical from the political role of Marxism ever since he proposed the combined destruction and recomposition in *Can Politics Be Thought?* 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 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 capital and the logic of struggle, supposedly marked by an incommensurability overcome only by the imaginary glue of communism.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Badiou is less and less convinced that we can understand politics “*through* history, *in* and *with* history,” as the early Marx said about the development of religion in *The Holy Family*, in a phrase often repeated by the late Daniel Bensaïd.<sup>15</sup> This is 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. For this reason, Badiou increasingly will come to see a political intervention—like an invention in art, a proof in mathematics, or an amorous encounter in love, as the other domains in which events can take place—as self-referential and authorized only by itself. This is especially clear in the period from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s, which is to say roughly from

*Being and Event* to *Metapolitics*, when the antihistoricist and anti-dialectical impetus of Badiou's work effectively reaches a peak. But many commentators still perceive such a stance at work in the proposed return to communism in *The Communist Hypothesis* and *The Rebirth of History*.

Now the drawbacks rightly or wrongly associated with this position should be obvious: a seemingly ethereal aloofness, a privileging of the philosopher-intellectual to the detriment of the masses in revolt, and in general a separation between praxis and Idea under the openly accepted philosophical guardianship of Plato rather than Marx. Conversely, however, the risks involved in the opposite position should be no less evident: an anti-intellectual disdain for theory in favor of the pedagogy of the deed, a tendency to explain away the emergence of autonomous political tactics on the basis of the historical cycles of the capitalist world system, and, in general, a reduction of the political or interventionist Marx of *The Communist Manifesto* and *The Civil War in France* in favor of the analytical or systemic Marx of *Capital*, with or without the subjective supplement of the *Grundrisse*.

In any case, 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 differently come to interpret the sense or meaning of the term "history," Badiou 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 political events are necessarily forced events rather than spontaneous uprisings.

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 mass 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.”<sup>16</sup> It is true that Badiou subsequently will abandon this view of the transitivity or dialectical working-together of history and politics, or of masses and classes organized through the party’s action against the State. Thus in *Can Politics Be Thought?* intransitivity will become the new key in determining the essence of politics, which marks the point of the real even at the beginning of Marx’s discourse and which only the Marxist critique of political economy later on ended up fixating into a fiction.

Between *Theory of the Subject* and *Being and Event*—with *Can Politics Be Thought?* in the mid-1980s serving as a pivotal transition—the old Marxist paradigm of base and superstructure, of forces and relations of production, and of masses, classes, party, and State is abandoned in favor of the seemingly disparate paradigm of situation, intervention, event, fidelity, subject, and truth that most readers will have come to associate with Badiou’s own philosophy. This does not mean that Badiou henceforth will abandon Marx’s dialectic and forgo the category of history altogether. In fact in *Can Politics Be Thought?* he proposes that the new vocabulary remains that of the dialectic. And, as recently as in *The Rebirth of History*, he is still revisiting the articulation in question, but now the history in which all politics is said to be anchored or rooted no longer refers to the objective factors but becomes an aspect wholly internal to the subjective process of sustaining a political event as such.

For the post-Maoist in Badiou, the point is not to politicize history but to historicize politics. If we witness a rebirth or reawakening of history, it is no longer premised on the objective history of the class struggle but on the becoming-historical of certain spontaneous revolts and uprisings and on the making-political of those historical moments. In other words, the dialectic, if this is still what we want to call the theory of the event, amounts to an immanent periodization of spontaneous riot, historical movement, and political organization. And so the new version of that old question asked in *Theory of the Subject* in terms of masses, classes, and party becomes in *The Rebirth of History* “How are we to inscribe politically, as active ma-

teriality under the sign of the Idea, a reawakening of History?,” particularly if such inscriptions are no longer predetermined but must be treated as both rare and contingent events. “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.”<sup>17</sup>

The militant lesson that Badiou most recently has drawn from the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement in North America, and the *indignados* of Puerta del Sol, for example, is that the philosopher should put an ear to the ground to listen to the rumble of massive popular events, while avoiding at all cost the danger of becoming the thought police or judge of history—or, worse, helping the existing cops and 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.”<sup>18</sup> Philosophy for Badiou cannot be the waiting room to the local police station or to the world-historical tribunal from which self-appointed progressives judge everything and nothing under the sky. Instead it is an activity of thought under the condition of events that are partially beyond its control. Badiou has recourse to a number of expressions to make sure that philosophy lets itself be conditioned by and learns from the political events of its time. Thus in French he most often uses the expression *être à l'école de*, literally “to be schooled by” the riots and uprisings of the past decade—exactly in the same way, in the 1970s, it was common usage among French Maoists to rely on this expression to refer to the task of theory in the face of the events of the “red years” that took their inspiration from the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In any case, we should not rush to judgment by imputing to the philosopher a desire for teaching a lesson to the participants in the recent revolts and uprisings. To do so would mean, ironically, to turn oneself into a mirror image of the philosopher rushing to the police station: instead of blaming the rioters for their lack of ideas, we would 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 Jacques Rancière's harsh attack in *Althusser's Lesson*. But while in *The Rebirth of History* the author does speak



of “lessons,” the fact remains that these are lessons to be learned from the people in revolt and not magisterially taught to them, very much in the same way that in *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 originally written for *Le Monde* with regard to the events of 2011 in Tunisia and Egypt. “Yes, we must be the pupils of these movements, not their stupid teachers.”<sup>19</sup>

Accusations against the philosopher’s overreaching ambition with regard to the recent uprisings depend on a profoundly un-Marxist presupposition that these accusers attribute to Badiou’s recent work on communism, namely, the presupposition that it would belong to the philosopher alone to formulate, develop, and propagate what he calls the communist Idea, without which there could be no reawakening of History. This would place today’s militants in the position of impatient schoolchildren with a likely attention-deficit disorder waiting for the philosopher’s master class about the role of the Idea. The latter, then, would be the philosopher’s brainchild with which he supposedly hopes to shepherd the rioters and looters in the direction of a resurgence of communism. Similarly certain readers will have concluded from the title of Badiou’s *Philosophy for Militants* that political militancy depends on the prior theoretical work performed by the professional philosopher. This too would lead us straight back to a form of speculative idealism along the lines of how Marx, in his 1873 afterword to the 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.”<sup>20</sup> 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* bear 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 ideas, thoughts, watchwords, and scripts. And whereas Marx speaks 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*, that is, a collective and generic "thought-practice," which is never exclusively in need of the philosopher to know either what is or what is to be done. "If politics is the practice of a thought in an absolutely self-sufficient register," as Badiou concludes 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."<sup>21</sup>

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 desire for hegemony over the future of politics. For, aside from the materialist principle which holds that it is philosophy that is conditioned by politics and not the other way around, part of this call 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 recognize in this a Platonic desire, though expanded from the aristocracy of the guardians to the popular collective in its entirety," Badiou remarks 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."<sup>22</sup> 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 philosophers and militants in revolt—like the famous hunter, fisherman, herdsman, and critic in the still overly masculine and pastoral version of communist society

prefigured in *The German Ideology*—become gathered into a single figure, perhaps even without having to split their time between 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!”<sup>23</sup> According to this formulation, the time may not seem ripe for the universal sharing of philosophy, but, instead of setting our expectant eyes on the future of what is yet to come, we could also read the desire for everyone to become a philosopher as something that already is actualized in every instance of collective struggle, no matter how local or short-lived. In this sense, the argument would be in favor 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 the extent to which Badiou himself facilitates such an understanding of politics as an immanent thought-practice.

In this 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 “this-sidedness” of practical activity, with the likely result of a gradual withering away of philosophy as a separate activity. If Badiou is reluctant to accept the last position as a simple given, it may very well correspond to the ultimate aim of his entire philosophy, which for this reason always harbors certain elements of antiphilosophy 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 observes 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."<sup>24</sup> Ideas would be part of the ongoing political process. 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, Badiou is always adamant about drawing a clear line of demarcation between philosophy and the various non-philosophical procedures—politics among them—in which events 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, or a form of love) 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 a simple way of summarizing what Marx and Badiou have in common is to consider both as thinkers of the generic: according to a footnote in *Of an Obscure Disaster*, this would be the most important conceptual innovation made in *Being and Event*. The location of this genericity is certainly different—with the young Marx, especially, situating the generic on the side of the human subject as a species-being, and Badiou, by contrast, assigning the generic to being qua being as uncovered 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, we also must avoid the false impression that Badiou's ontology would depend on some kind of phenomenological gift as the appearing of pure being in the miracle of an event. Instead, both Marx and Badiou offer versions of a materialist and dialectical understanding of the link within a given situation between being, truth, event, and subject. The author of *Being and Event* merely pushes the deconstruction of being all the way to the point where the impasse of being is at the same time the pass of the subject. This

means that the generic thought-practice of politics, which organizes a material fidelity to the chance occurrence of an event, can still be considered an instance of what Marx, in his “Theses on Feuerbach,” calls revolutionary practice—even if for Badiou the age of revolutions definitely ended with the Great Proletarian 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.”<sup>25</sup>

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Does this mean that there is no significant break in Badiou’s work with regard to the militant role of Marxism? Has the crisis of Marxism affected only the vulgar misconceptions limited to the doctrinal fixation of Marxism-Leninism in the Soviet manuals of historical and dialectical materialism? Why, then, would Badiou affirm the need for the destruction and recomposition of Marxism? And, finally, to what extent does a text like *Can Politics Be Thought?* mark a shift in Badiou’s philosophical itinerary by contributing to this process?

Here some background history may be useful. Indeed, prior to its original publication in 1985 in France, *Peut-on penser la politique?* had been presented in the guise of two lengthy exposés, in January and June 1984, offered at the Center for Philosophical Research on the Political. Housed at the École Normale Supérieure on rue d’Ulm, this was an initiative begun at the end of 1980 by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy upon an invitation from Jacques Derrida and with the added support of Badiou’s former teacher and Derrida’s older colleague at the École, Louis Althusser. The significance of this theoretical and institutional conjuncture cannot be stressed enough. While many devoted scholars of Derrida’s work have commented on the fact that the Center marks the moment when deconstruction becomes inseparable from the philosophical interrogation of the essence of the political, few of them have paid attention to the concomitant factor of seeing an unexpected dialogue emerge with a number of Althusser’s ex-students. Thus among the

notable figures trained in the Althusserian school besides Badiou, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy also invited Étienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière to present their work in progress at the Center, work that eventually would lead to major publications such as Rancière's *On the Shores of Politics* and *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Unlike Balibar's and Rancière's texts, though, Badiou's talks never became part of the published proceedings, which would remain limited to the first two years of activities at the Center collected in the volumes *Rejouer le politique* and *Le Retrait du politique*—still to this day, moreover, only partially translated in English in volumes such as *Retreating the Political*. It is therefore understandable that most readers would fail to make the connection between Badiou's text and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy's efforts to reassess the philosophical legacy of the revolutionary left in the wake of Heidegger's and Derrida's proposed deconstruction of the tradition of Western metaphysics. Understandable but also unfortunate, for this failure represents yet another missed opportunity to gauge the effects of a possible encounter between two parallel, if not wholly independent, theoretical and philosophical orientations indicated by the names of Marx and Heidegger in Germany and by those of Althusser and Derrida in France.

It is only in the context in which the arguments behind *Peut-on penser la politique?* were first presented that we can explain why Badiou begins his intervention with a "Threshold" or "Liminary," written in August 1984, in which he responds to the idea that served as one of the principal guidelines for the collaborative work of the Center at the École Normale Supérieure, where Althusser and Derrida were both teaching at the time: the idea of a "retreat" of the political. The French expression *retrait* here suggests both a retreating or withdrawing and a new treatment or retracing of the stakes of the political. Derrida already had played on this duplicity of the trait-as-retreat a few years earlier, in texts like "The Retreat of Metaphor," but readers of Heidegger in French translation also would not have been surprised to see Derrida in *The Truth in Painting*, for example, offer lengthy ruminations on the idiom of the trait and its

withdrawal in an attempt to bring together two families of related terms from Heidegger's original German: on the one hand, terms like *Riss*, *Umriss*, and *Aufriss*, and, on the other, terms like *Zug*, *Bezug*, and *Entzug* or *Entziehung*. Every tracing of a line or trait, according to the combined logic of these two idiomatic series, is simultaneously an inscription and an erasure; every stroke or outline at one and the same time opens a rift or lets itself be engulfed by an abyss; and every relation or rapport marks at once a retraction or defection of the ties that bind us. In the French text of *Peut-on penser la politique?* Badiou adds yet another possibility to this complex configuration, insofar as he links Marxism's historical credibility to its capacity to *tirer des traites*, that is, "to draw lines" or "lay claims" on history as a process endowed with meaning. By the same token, if Marxism in the early 1980s finds itself "in retreat," *en retraite*, or "takes its retirement," *prend sa retraite*, this must be understood in terms of a growing incapacity to lay claims on being the referent that gives meaning to the process of history.

Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, in the documents with which they punctuate and assess the results of the Center's research, explicitly adopt the logic of the retreat based on the Heideggerian and Derridean understanding of the term:

The *retreat* in the Heideggerian sense (*Entzug*) of the presentation which only takes place as the concealment or the disappearance of what is presented (this is the structure or the movement of *alētheia*) and, with the Derridean value of the "re-treat," of the "re-tracing" (combining *Zug* and *Riss*) implying in the retreat a "new" incision or inscription, which cuts out again that which retreats.<sup>26</sup>

Even more so than Derrida in "The Retreat of Metaphor" or *The Truth in Painting*, however, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy add a decidedly political slant to this argument. They thus propose that, at a time when globally we are becoming enmeshed in a soft form of totalitarianism in which politics encroaches upon every aspect of everyday life, a step back may be needed in order to redefine the essence

of the political. In what they also call a “liminary” or “introductory” statement, the conveners of the research center define their purpose as follows:

In these times, in particular, in which the most simple political despair (weariness), but also the ease or calculation of things, generated every imaginable regression and reduced political debate to almost nothing, it was necessary to give ourselves some room. Not in order to shut ourselves off from the political or to reject it but, on the contrary, to replay its question anew. If there was a chance, albeit a very slender one, of a philosophical intervention in politics (or with regard to the political), this was its—exorbitant—cost, if one considers it to be such.<sup>27</sup>

A crucial part of this proposal thus relies on the conceptual distinction between politics, or *la politique*, and what, for lack of a better word, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy prefer to call the political, or *le politique* in French. In the “Opening Address” to the Center, they add:

In speaking of *the political* we fully intend not to designate politics. The questioning about the political or about the essence of the political is, on the contrary, what for us must ultimately take stock of the political presuppositions itself of philosophy (or, if one prefers, of metaphysics), that is to say, of a political determination of essence. But this determination does not itself produce a political position; it is the very position of the political, from the Greek *polis* to what is deployed in the modern age as the qualification of the political by the subject (and of the subject by the political). What remains to be thought by us, in other words, is not a new institution (or instruction) of politics by thought, but the political institution of so-called Western thought.<sup>28</sup>

By accepting the invitation to speak at the Center for Philosophical Research on the Political, Badiou thus also accepts the challenge of submitting the discourse of Marxism to an interrogation inspired by the work of Heidegger and Derrida. In fact the combination of



destruction and recomposition can be considered Badiou's version of deconstruction. But this also means that to some extent he accepts the idea that Marxism—or, rather, Marxism-Leninism—marks the metaphysical age in the political ontology of the West. Or, as Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy had said, “In our translation: socialism (in the sense of ‘real or actually existing socialism’) is the complete and completing figure of philosophy’s imposition—up to and including what, for one of us at least, could have represented the hope of a critique and a revolutionary radicalization of established Marxism.”<sup>29</sup>

Here perhaps I should add that Badiou, who had been working in almost complete isolation from the dominant academic discourses at the time, would be forever grateful for the chance of a dialogue provided by Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy. “I hold them in the highest esteem and love them very much,” Badiou told me in an interview, before shedding some light on the circumstances that surrounded the original presentation of *Can Politics Be Thought?* as part of the research center on rue d’Ulm:

We met in the early 1980s, precisely at a time which for me, no doubt, was the period of maximum isolation, because the New Philosophy had been installed, everybody had rallied more or less to the socialist Left and to Mitterrand, and truth be told, if you consider my own politico-philosophical position, precisely at the time of *Theory of the Subject*, you will find that it went completely against the grain and was worked out in absolute isolation. I really should thank Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy for not having participated in this isolation and for having invited me to the political seminar, which they directed at the time on rue d’Ulm.<sup>30</sup>

Badiou's specific response to his friends' invitation, however, is nothing short of perverse. With all due respect, he accepts that what is happening at the time may be described in the Heideggerian terms of a retreat. And he likewise adopts the distinction between politics and the political, but only to invert the evaluation of both terms in Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's use. The retreat of the political thus frees up the mobility of politics as a militant thought-practice for

which Marx's invention, after all, continues to serve as an exemplary model. Except to add that, insofar as Marxism has led to a fixation of militant discourse into a metaphysical doctrine, Marx's beginning must be given the chance of a recommencement. Hence the twofold approach of *Can Politics Be Thought?*

As for *Of an Obscure Disaster*, no further context is needed, I think, to grasp the force of Badiou's rebuttal of the common argument about the "death" of communism after the collapse of the Soviet Union, other than to mention that the title comes from a verse in Stéphane Mallarmé's sonnet "The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe," the last tercet of which reads as follows:

Calme bloc ici-bas chu d'un désastre obscur  
Que ce granit du moins montre à jamais sa borne  
Aux noirs vols du Blasphème épars dans le futur.

Calm block here below fallen of an obscure disaster,  
May this granite at least reveal its limit for ever  
To the glum flights of Blasphemy dispersed into the future.<sup>31</sup>

Other than the Mallarméan syntax, of which Badiou has always been fond and which likewise dominates both texts translated in this volume, only a few technical terms pose serious problems for the translator. In *Peut-on penser la politique?* Badiou systematically uses *ouvrier* as a referent for Marxist politics. In many cases, as when he refers to the *mouvement ouvrier*, this can easily be rendered as "workers' movement." Elsewhere, however, as when he posits in the section "Refutation of Idealism" that the deconstruction of Marxism as a metaphysical discourse cannot go all the way but must stop at the presupposition that all emancipatory politics depend on a subject that is *populaire* and *ouvrier*, this reference is more problematic. To translate the adjective *ouvrier* as "working class" in this case would mean missing out on the fact that Badiou is participating in a broader interrogation of the elements of class essentialism involved in the official doctrine of Marxism-Leninism. For this reason, I have

preferred “workerist,” even though for the Maoist organization of the UCFML in which Badiou was active throughout the 1970s, *ouvriérisme* or “workerism” implied an ideological conflation of the working class with its immediate political capacity, resulting in a limitation of militant struggles to purely economic demands. “It is completely false to think that any social practice of any worker, no matter which one, is revolutionary or proletarian,” the UCFML insists in an early circular. “We must firmly combat these orientations which, despite the ‘left-wing’ air that they may try to put on, are in reality from the right. They indeed reject the mass alliance and the materialist analysis.”<sup>32</sup> I will leave it to others to decide if and to what extent “workerist,” in the way Badiou mobilizes the term in *Can Politics Be Thought?*, may communicate with the tradition of “workerism” or *operaismo* in the Italian tradition.

Finally, there is the strange neologism of the *horlieu* or “outplace,” which also appears in *Can Politics Be Thought?* This term refers back to a complex elaboration in *Theory of the Subject*, in which Badiou opposes the *horlieu*, a portmanteau word derived from *hors* + *lieu*, to the *esplace*, or “splace,” another neologism of his own invention based on *espace* + *place*, that is, the space of assigned places. The dialectical opposition between splace and outplace, in this sense, continues and revises the way in which Badiou in his earlier Maoist work *Theory of Contradiction* had opposed place and force. As he explains in *Theory of the Subject*:

A remark on terminology: if one opposes force to place, as I shall continually do, it will always be more homogeneous to say “space of placement” to designate the action of the structure. It would be even better to forge the term *splace*. If, on the contrary, one says “place,” which is more Mallarméan, we will need to say, in the Lacanian manner, “place-holding” or “lieutenancy” for “place.” But “force” is then heterogeneous to designate the a-structural-topological side. It would be more appropriate to say: the outplace.<sup>33</sup>

For Badiou, an event thus always takes place as the outplace of a structure of assigned places. In Mallarmé’s terms, it is that which

proves that what will have taken place is not just the place itself, but the dice throw from which results the constellation of an eternal truth.

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## NOTES

- 1 For a more systematic account, see Bruno Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011). In what follows, I also rely on materials first published in “The Fate of the Generic: Marx with Badiou,” in *(Mis)readings of Marx in Contemporary Continental Philosophy*, ed. Jessica Whyte and Jernej Habjan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 211–26.
- 2 Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2012), 8.
- 3 Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. and introduction by Bruno Bosteels (London: Continuum, 2009), 182.
- 4 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 7.
- 5 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 8–9.
- 6 Paul Sandevince, *Qu'est-ce qu'une politique marxiste?* (Marseille: Potemkine, 1978), 6. More recently, see Alain Badiou, *Qu'est-ce que j'entends par marxisme?* (Paris: Editions Sociales, 2016).
- 7 Alain Badiou, *Théorie de la contradiction* (Paris: François Maspero, 1975), 16.
- 8 Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 44. Even Marx and Engels themselves had put under erasure the following passage 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.” Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), 3:303–4.
- 9 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 8–9.
- 10 UCFML, *Sur le maïsisme et la situation en Chine après la mort de Mao Tsé-Toung* (Marseille: Potemkine, 1976), 3.
- 11 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 12.
- 12 Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. and introduction by Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005), 58.

- 13 Aside from the texts collected in Sylvain Lazarus, *L'intelligence de la politique*, ed. Natacha Michel (Marseille: Editions Al Dante, 2013), see also the anonymous text, most likely authored by Lazarus, "Le mode dialectique," *La Distance Politique* 3 (May 1992): 4–6, available in English as "The Dialectical Mode," trans. Bruno Bosteels, in *Badiou and Cultural Revolution*, special issue of *positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 13.3 (2005): 663–68. For Badiou's critical rejoinder to the work of Lazarus, see chapter 2 in his *Metapolitics*.
- 14 See Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *Marx, prénom: Karl* (Paris: Galimard, 2012).
- 15 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family*, in *Collected Works*, 4:109. See also Daniel Bensaïd, "'Dans et par l'histoire': Retours sur la Question juive," in Karl Marx, *Sur la Question juive*, ed. Daniel Bensaïd (Paris: La Fabrique, 2006), 74–135.
- 16 Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 27.
- 17 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 67, 89. For Badiou's changing views of history and politics, see also chapters 3 and 7 in my *Badiou and Politics*.
- 18 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." Gregory Ellior'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." See Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 21.
- 19 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 106.
- 20 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes, introduction by Ernest Mandel (London: Penguin, 1976), 102.
- 21 Badiou, *Metapolitics*, 86–87.
- 22 Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. and introduction by Bruno Bosteels (New York: Verso, 2012), 37. 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.
- 23 Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, 38. Compare with Marx and Engels: "In 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" (*The German Ideology* in *Collected Works*, 5:47).

- 24 Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, 87.
- 25 Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, 5:4.
- 26 See "Annexe," in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *Retreating the Political*, ed. Simon Sparks (London: Routledge, 1997), 138–39.
- 27 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "Foreword to The Center for Philosophical Research on the Political," in *Retreating the Political*, 105–6.
- 28 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "Opening Address to the Centre for Philosophical Research on the Political," in *Retreating the Political*, 110.
- 29 Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, "Opening Address," 110–11.
- 30 Alain Badiou, "Can Change Be Thought? An Interview with Alain Badiou Conducted by Bruno Bosteels (Paris, June 10, 1999)," reprinted in Bosteels, *Badiou and Politics*, 291.
- 31 Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le Tombeau d'Edgar Poe" (The Tomb of Edgar Allan Poe), in *Collected Poems and Other Verse*, trans. E. H. Blackmore and A. M. Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 70–71 (translation modified). Badiou would go on to use the first hemistich of this verse as the title for his novel, *Calme bloc ici-bas* (Paris: P.O.L., 1997). For an interesting analysis of Badiou's text *Of an Obscure Disaster* based on this Mallarméan poem, see also the afterword by Ozren Pupovac and Ivana Momčilović to the bilingual, Serbo-Croatian and English, edition, *Of an Obscure Disaster: On the End of State-Truth*, trans. Barbara P. Fulks, revised by Nina Power, Ozren Pupovac, and Alberto Toscano (Maastricht, Netherlands: Jan van Eyck Academie and Arkzin, 2009), 62–79. This also gives me an occasion to express my appreciation for another, earlier translation of Badiou's text, "Of an Obscure Disaster: On the End of the Truth of State," trans. Barbara P. Fulks, *Lacanian Ink* 22 (2003): 58–89. Clearly the central concept in the subtitle *Sur la fin de la vérité d'État* is difficult to translate in English because it presupposes Badiou's definition of the State. Instead of having recourse to "State-truth" or "truth of State" in order to render *vérité d'État*, I have preferred to keep a more straightforward expression such as "the truth of the State."
- 32 "Circulaire sur quelques problèmes idéologiques" (Sept. 1970), reprinted in UCFML, *Première année d'existence d'une organisation maoïste, printemps 1970/printemps 1971* (Paris: François Maspero, 1972), 20.
- 33 Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, 10.