



Between the event and democratic materialism

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review of:

Bruno Bosteels (2011) *Badiou and Politics*. London: Duke University Press. (PB, pp. 464, £18.99, ISBN 978-0-8223-5076-7)

Bruno Bosteels, Professor of Romance Studies at the University of Cornell, has translated into English *Theory of the subject* (Badiou, 2009a) and *Wittgenstein's anti-philosophy* (Badiou, 2011). Additionally, he has written a number of significant articles and essays on Alain Badiou, including 'Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics' (2005), *Badiou or the restarting of dialectical materialism* (2007), *Alain Badiou: A polemical trajectory* (2009a). He is therefore one of the best specialists of Badiou within the Anglophone academy. Furthermore, Bosteels is an expert in French contemporary radical philosophy, having also published on Jacques Rancière (2009b).

Recently, Badiou has become one of the most prominent Continental thinkers in the English-speaking world. This is demonstrated by the amount of studies and scholarship on every part of Badiou's thought. This is illustrated most clearly by the creation of *The International Journal of Badiou Studies*. Similarly, nearly all of his major books have been translated over the last ten years, including *Being and event* (2005) and *Logic of worlds* (2009a). The acceleration of the translation of Badiou's books into English reflects his rising fame within Anglophone departments. This is demonstrated by the fact that while *Being and event* was published in English 17 years after the original French edition, his *Logic of worlds* was published in English just four years after the original. By contrast, one of Badiou's first books that interested an English-speaking academic audience was *Deleuze: The clamor of being* (1999), as though the philosophy of Badiou would not be significant per se. In reality, within the French academy Badiou had been teaching in the rather marginal university of Paris 8 before his retirement from French higher education because of his commitment to radical politics. Indeed, Badiou's oeuvre has recently come to the fore with his polemical writings on French contemporary politics.

Badiou and politics constitutes one of the first attempts at giving a coherent interpretation of Badiou's political theory. The point of departure for Bosteels is the rejection of the two main interpretations of Badiou, namely the ones articulated by Peter Hallward and Slavoj Žižek:

Both Hallward and Žižek, each in his own inimitable style, proceed to follow up their praise with a strong critique, to the effect that Badiou's philosophy would fall in the traps of dogmatic, sovereign, or absolutist understanding of the event and of militant, not to say blind, fidelity to it, without giving due consideration either to the question of relationality and historical mediation (Hallward) or that of negativity, repetition, and the death drive (Žižek). (xi)

Contrary to Hallward and Žižek's idea that the event is opposed radically and ontologically to being, Bosteels argues that Badiou's philosophy theorizes a kind of continuity between the event and being (xi). Consequently, Bosteels puts emphasis not only on *Being and Event* and *Logics of Worlds*, but also – in opposition to most commentators who tend to focus exclusively on the aforementioned texts – on *Theory of the Subject* and other works from the 1970s (xiv).

Consequently, Bosteels enumerates three 'working hypotheses' (xii). First, he characterizes the whole oeuvre of Badiou as a 'dialectical materialism' one, signalling a continuity between the Maoist years of Badiou (between 1968 and 1985) and his post-Maoist period (xvii). Second, Bosteels claims that Badiou's politics involve a more extensive truth procedure than art, science and love (xviii). Thirdly, he argues that mathematics has a secondary function within the philosophy and politics of Badiou; on this view, 'the role of mathematics becomes heuristic at best and analogical at worst' (xviii).

Bosteels thus provides a Hegelian reading of Badiou, in contrast to a Kantian one. The latter insists on the mediation between different or contradictory domains, whereas the former puts emphasis on separation: '[Badiou] is seen as setting up a rigid divide along Kantian (perhaps even pre-Kantian) lines between the world of phenomena and the realm of things in themselves' (2). From this perspective, Badiou is set in strong opposition to Deleuze's anti-dialectical political thought (13).

However, Bosteels does not use an altogether Hegelian dialectic, but rather a Maoist one characterized by the concepts of 'alienation' and 'scission': 'Hegel must be split rather than merely put upside down or discarded and spit on' (11). Accordingly, Badiou's politics is seen to contradict any ontology or anthropology (32). History now plays an important role in the evolution of Badiou's political thought through a rejection of Althusser and Lacan's 'inability or unwillingness, of either thinker to find any significant political truth the events of May'68' (77). Therefore, Bosteels argues that Badiou's subject of truth is defined in terms of politics (104).

For Bosteels, the political experience of Badiou was essential in shaping his political philosophy. In fact, Badiou's involvement with Maoism is defined by a kind of dialectical continuity:

Badiou's relation to Maoism, which I will suggest amounts to a form of post-Maoism, can in fact be summarized in the ambiguous use of the narrative present. If we were to spell out this ambiguity, we could say that Badiou was and still is a Maoist, even though he no longer is the same Maoist that he once was (110-111).

In reality, Badiou was a member of the UCFML (Union of the Marxist-Leninist Communists of France) which opposed, on the one hand, the Proletarian Left and their supposed fascination for spontaneous violence and lack of political strategy, and, on the other hand, the orthodox and bureaucratic Maoists form the PCMLF (French Communist Marxist Leninist Party) (131). Accordingly, the UCFML represents the supposed correct political line. Badiou's politics, according to Bosteels, define a political truth, or indeed any truth, as 'an ongoing process': 'Badiou's philosophy, then, can be read as an untimely recommencement of the materialist dialectic' (173). The materialist dialectic – particularly in *Logics of worlds* – consists in the description of bodies, signs, and 'truths', as opposed to postmodernism, for which there are no truths (200). Consequently, Badiou links dialectically the site as a locus of multiples and the event as a locus of truths (242). Ultimately, Bosteels describes Badiou's politics as a dialectical critique of the left-wing communist political position, which is exemplified by Deleuze and Guattari as well as Hardt and Negri: 'In all these cases leftism involves an external opposition that is as radical as it is politically inoperative, along the lines of the spontaneous and unmediated antagonism between masses and the state' (284).

One question that could be raised concerning Bosteels' interpretation of the oeuvre of Badiou lies in the assumption that there are no breaks in it. The works of Badiou from 1968 onward would be characterised in their entirety in relation to the theme of the dialectic. However, *Logics of worlds* clearly puts more emphasis on the topic of dialectic, referring explicitly to a materialist dialectic, than *Being and Event*. Daniel Bensaid (2004: 94) describes *Being and Event* as outlining a 'rupturalist' ontology and viewing the event as a miracle. In other words, it might be possible to argue that there is a tension within Badiou's oeuvre between rupturalist texts (such as *Being and event* or *Ethics*) and more dialectical texts (such as *Theory of subject* or *Logic of worlds*). However, Bosteels argues that a dialectical interpretation of Badiou's is more fruitful than a rupturalist one from the political point of view. In fact, the main advantage of dialectics consists in saving Badiou from the leftist deviationism typically represented by anti-Hegelian politics. This view is grounded in Badiou's Maoist and post-Maoist politics. Furthermore, Bosteels is brilliant in demonstrating the link between Badiou's militancy at the UCFML and his later political conceptions. Indeed, in his view, post-Maoism is a consequence and not a rejection of the Maoist experience. Nonetheless, the notion of leftist deviationism is ambiguous within the French political context because this term was mainly used by the French Communist Party (referring to Lenin's *Left-wing communism: An infantile disorder*) in order to discredit the Trotskyites, Maoists, anarchists and Situationists. From the standpoint of the French Communist Party, Badiou's politics has always been leftist. Consequently, the usage of this concept concerning Badiou seems quite paradoxical.

A second question raises a more historical point. Bosteels lauds Badiou's, and the UCFML's, political critique of the Proletarian Left and, more generally, of left-wing communism. However, the Proletarian Left produced the most influential political Maoist practice within the French context and was able to create some links between students, intellectuals, workers and immigrants, for example in the Renault's factory of Boulogne-Billancourt. Thanks to the support of Sartre, its newspaper *La cause du peuple* was widely circulated and very vocal about the proletariat's interests and struggles. It therefore seems rather inaccurate to dismiss leftist politics without providing a detailed critique of its political tradition and experience of French left-wing communism.

A third question revolves around the idea of the party. Bosteels argues that Badiou proposes a mediation between State power and resistance to it, although Badiou clearly lost faith in party-based politics after 1985 (see Badiou, 2000: 106-107). However, within Marxist thought the party, through the political organisation of the working class, plays a role of dialectical mediation between the repression of the State and society. As such, Marxist philosopher and Trotskyist militant Daniel Bensaid (2004) is consistent in denouncing the anti-dialectical and theological aspect of Badiou's philosophy since he sees the party as essential. Unless prepared by professional militants within an organised political structure, the event as a political truth procedure does indeed seem to emerge as 'miracle' or absolute rupture in the work of Badiou.

However, these critical questions should not obscure the considerable merit of Bosteels' work, which consists in providing a meticulous and coherent interpretation of Badiou's politics. Significantly, *Badiou and politics* investigates Badiou's militant experience and philosophical reasoning in extensive detail in a way that had not hitherto been achieved.

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