

Marxism's puncture

Reading Badiou's *Can politics be thought?*

Can politics be thought? published in France in 1985 marks a threshold in Badiou's writings, at which he distances himself from the dialectics of scission expounded in *Theory of the Subject* gradually orienting his thought toward a meta-ontology of the event as set forth in the first volume of *Being and Event*, and a pragmatics of truth's becoming as developed in *Logics of Worlds*.

Badiou's mid-1980s passage from a dialectics of destruction to a non-dialectical meta-ontology is characterized by the adoption of Deleuze's primary ontological axiom that being consists of infinite multiplicities that cannot be determined numerically. For Deleuze, to this multiplicities of multiplicities, which are pure difference in itself and hence only thinkable, an excess is immanent that challenges thinking and existence alike to confront the question of infinity. Badiou's adoption of Deleuze's ontological axiom of the quantitative infinity of being that made him since emphasize that Deleuze was »the first to properly grasp that a contemporary metaphysics must consist in a theory of multiplicities and an embrace of singularities « (OMM 68), and forces him to determine over and over again the »dividing line between Deleuze's doctrine and [his] own« (ETB 101) is first traceable through *Can politics be thought?*.

The book testifies to the genesis of a theoretical operation central to Badiou's thinking of politics, namely the organisation of multiple theorems through the correlation of the infinite and the Two. On the basis of this correlation Badiou arranges four theorems in *Can Politics be thought?* elaborated and specified in his later writings, in which they take on the following basic forms: the ontological theorem of inconsistent multiplicities, the meta-ontological theorem of the event suspending the laws of being and appearance, the existentialist theorem of the choice of choice, by which the hypothetical consequences of an event are tested, and the topological theorem of the alternative of two possibilities constituting the locus where this choice takes place. In *Logics of Worlds* Badiou expands on the primacy of the correlation of the infinite and the Two by developing a theory of points claiming that the incorporation of an event's consequences happens point by point. The essence of a political body being able of these incorporations consists in its capacity to treat a point, in which the situation is contracted to a simple alternative of two possibilities. Politics is thus thought as bringing the infinite before »the tribunal of the alternative« (LW 400), as filtering it through a point of *either/ or*, which exists (if it exists) both, as objective alternative of two possibilities and as subjective decision in which, as Kierkegaard demanded, choice is chosen.

I propose to discuss *Can politics be thought?* against the backdrop of the problem of politics' purification executed through the correlation of the infinite and the Two. I would like to debate, how the decisionist filtering of the infinite, as which Badiou conceptualises the retroactive registration of an event, purifies the political act to an ideal rightness articulated in the lexicon of truth. My thesis is that Badiou's occasional decisionism subverts his materialism and makes it impossible to think the paradoxical status of politics as being marked by the mechanisms, against which it fights. This

condition obligates to conceptualise what Althusser in his last draft on Spinoza called the »intervall of a distance« (S 121) to be inserted by politics into its own effectivity interrupting its own consequences at the very threshold, at which it turns into reactive modes. From the conceptual primacy of scission to that of subtraction, Badiou thinks politics—its constitution and procedure—as enforcement of and exposition to strict alternatives, not *this* but *that*, a *but*, which in itself is untouched from the conjuncture, in which it intervenes, since it is thought as its cut or distancing measurement. Correspondingly, Badiou tends to reduce the analysis of the conjuncture to the terms of State and representation. As I will show referring to Badiou's reflection of Stalinism, the purification of the political act disables to think its failure or decomposition other than in terms of treason or absence. Politics is true, or it is not. The exceptional One of the *but*, the one of two possibilities, is the sense Badiou confers to Rimbaud's notion of »logical revolts«, through which he makes political act being sacrosanct, its inner conflictuality being erased. Given that the correlation of the infinite and the Two is one of the dividing lines that Badiou draws between Deleuze and himself, it would be decisive, yet beyond the scope of today's session, to confront Badiou's theory of points with Deleuze's concept of the limit defining the process of becoming.

Against the backdrop of Badiou's co-articulation of existentialist decisionism and truth, I will discuss the three themes, through which Badiou confronts the crisis of Marxism in the first part of *Can politics be thought?*, Dominiek will then continue by commenting on the second part, in particular regarding Badiou's logical exercises.

First theme: the fiction of the political

In the introduction to *Can politics be thought?* Badiou criticizes Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's idea of the retreat of the political and inverts the figure of political difference established by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe who privileged the notion of the political over that of politics. Badiou, in contrast, sets the real of politics against the fiction of the political. This alternative is articulated through a hidden shift of the notion of the political from deconstruction to Marxism dissimulating the points, at which Badiou comes in close proximity to Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's critique of Marxism, especially regarding the concepts of social reappropriation, communal bond, and sense of history.

Second theme: the torsion of Marxism

In *Can politics be thought?* Badiou draws on the Heideggerian motif of *Verwindung* or torsion of metaphysics applying it to Marxism whose metaphysical cycle he defines to be closed leaving an utterly devastated field. Marxism—Badiou states—has destroyed itself through its economist and sociologist lines of thought and its State-oriented, institutionalized and representational practises. What is left, is a Marxism reduced to a dead doctrine, an uninhabitable place from which Badiou calls for the recommencement of a minimal Marxism by reformulating what Badiou calls its inaugural hypothesis—a politics of non-domination.

Third theme: Marx's hypothesis

Through the limit-reading of one sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*—»The communists do not form a party distinct from other workers' parties«—Badiou claims Marx to be the first who thought politics as supplementation of an event through the retroactive materialisation of its consequences. Hence, the invariant of politics, first

articulated by Marx, consists in the capacity of the masses to give consistency to an eventual moment of rupture. This capacity is not thought as expressing a latently given social force, but as dissolving the social bond.

ad 1, the fiction of the political

Can politics be thought? consists of two revised lectures delivered in January 1983 and June 1984 at the *Centre de recherches philosophiques sur le politique* at Jean Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's invitation.

Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe proposed to distinguish between the notion of the political and the notion of politics. Referring to Arendt and Lefort, they claim that politics is reduced to management and economics, thus, having lost all specificity attributable to itself. That is why, it is disappearing in its omni-appearance. The retreat of the political is the limit-event through which Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe think the recommencement of the political. The closure of the political is not its end, but the occasion for an alternative beginning on another line. For Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe, the twist of retreat and recommencement proves the extreme form of coexistence of the philosophical with the political. The political registers the limit of philosophy, because its retreat stages nothing else than the retreat of essence itself, which denies metaphysics' pretense or entitlement to subsume politics under a principle, a telos or a sense. Ultimately, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe claim that with the withdrawal of the political a non-essentialist essence of the political occurs. This political is qualified as opening to modes of experience that Marxism tended to suspend: disappropriation, expenditure and inoperative negativity.

Badiou reduces the motif of the retreat of the political to a fiction that evacuates politics from thought. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's theoretical operation is defined by him as a turn toward the vanishing of politics, an orientation »toward that which disappears«, essentializing politics »in the very place of its vanishing«, thinking »the axioms of [politics'] absencing« (CT 2). Though Badiou is right in detecting that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's thought of politics lacks an organisational and strategic dimension, by reducing it to guarding politics' disappearance, he dissimulates the themes he has taken up from Left-Heideggerianism or conflictually shares with it, in particular the deconstruction of political philosophy and of the economism, humanism and social essentialism immanent to Marxism. By focussing on the reversal of the political difference, by posing the real of politics to the fiction of the political, Badiou avoids to confront his decisionist existentialism with the existentialism of unresevered loss, expenditure or inaction that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe support in Bataille. Moreover, he avoids to adress the alternative trajectory of the single theme of interruption, through which he thinks Marxism—the theme of class separation as to be found from Sorel to Bataille and Benjamin. With this polemic method, Badiou installs his own thought as exception to the catastrophe of non-thought oscillating between orthodox Marxism or liberal anti-Marxism.

He secures his own position by displacing the formula of »the fiction of the political« from left-Heideggerianism to Marxism. Though Marxism started as a critique of political

economy's anthropological fiction—the homo economicus—, it enclosed itself, Badiou states, in economism and humanism. Hence, Marxism destroyed its own initial operation of tracking down the very point in which politics exceeds political economy:

»So called Marxist political economy [...] has not been able to criticize its own critique. It has philosophically fictionalized that which both Marx and Lenin had pointed out, namely, that the real of politics is never anything but encountered and chanced upon.« (CT 5f)

Badiou concludes that Marxism has spread an imaginary narrative of the political that founds itself in an assumed consistency of the social bond. As already stated in *Theory of the Subject*, Badiou claims, that there is no social class relation, there is only an act of scission executed by an anomalous class subject that dissolves class relationality. Conclusively, Badiou demands to undo Marxist foundationalism, in which the historical process of the socialisation of productive forces is projected into the political process of the subjectivization of the proletariat. Badiou's critique of Marxism is thus based on one argument: the disarticulation of the expressive bond between society and politics. As exception to the social, politics is defined to be »absolutely mobile, non-statist and unfixable«, in other words it is »the punctual outside of the very place of social relations«. The absolutisation of the interruptive character of politics will push Badiou toward the aporetic question, how to integrate the retroactive conservatism he attributes to politics, i.e. the process to stabilise the eventual interruption by materialising its space of consequences through interventions of testifying and conserving sort.

ad 2, the torsion of Marxism

The second theme, on which Badiou meditates in *Can politics be thought?*—the *Verwindung* or torsion of Marxism—, directly continues on this line of politics as puncture: to exit the crisis of Marxism, requires to apply the punctuating force of politics to Marxism itself. Hence, the torsion of Marxism, its recommencement in the instance of its closure, consists in Marxism's self-puncture. In other words, Badiou responds to the crisis of Marxism by expecting Marxism to become the subject of its own destruction, thus to overturn the closure into a new beginning in the very place of destruction itself. The idea of the positive existence of destruction has been developed by Badiou in *Theory of the Subject*. In *Can politics be thought?* he combines it with the Heideggerian motif of *Verwindung* stating that Marxism-Leninism has been the »metaphysical era of political ontology« (C 17). Badiou argues that Marx's original hypothesis of communist politics has been substituted by an apparatus of Marxification, in which Marxism transforms into a self-reflective system, closing down in instances of representation: the State, the syndicates, the doctrines—»Marxism has become in itself its own representation«. (C 16) The Heideggerian motif of *Verwindung* is taken up by Badiou by claiming that the »completion of this circle of self-referentiality« leads to the point, where »it withdraws itself completely as object of Marxism« (C 16) opening the chance for a new beginning.

The recommencement starts by Marxism separating itself from what Badiou calls its system of referents that one by one has collapsed. With Lazarus Badiou lists three referents of Marxism, firstly, the statist or victorious referent (i.e. the socialist State

projects, in the first instance the Soviet Union), secondly, the anti-imperialist referent (i.e. the national liberation struggles that deployed a new type of asymmetrical warfare, rooted in the countryside, organizing the peasantry, unfolding in stages and prolonged manner), thirdly the workerist referent (i.e. the union and factory activism of the masses).

»Through all three [referents]«, Badiou states, »the conviction finds its way that history worked in the direction of the credibility of Marxism. Insurrection, the State, war, the nation, the unionist activism of the masses: all these terms that sum up—in appearance—the political capacity of the workers found their articulation in Marxism and in their subjective agent, the Marxist political party.« (C 2)

Badiou defines the crisis of Marxism in terms of the step by step collapse of this framework of references. Simultaneously, he saves Marx's initial political hypothesis from this collapse. This separation is accomplished by detecting in each reference a fundamental equivocation that distinguishes the political capacity of the proletariat from its state bound, war bound and apparatus bound reference. That is to say, Badiou draws a line between Marx's political idea and its semblance. This operation enables Badiou to evacuate Marxism proper—that what he calls its initial hypothesis—from the scene of political conflict and crisis: The framework of referents is in crisis, but not the qualifying kernel of Marxism itself. In other words, Badiou traces the crisis of Marxism back to the fact of an equivocation generated by the fusion of Marxist with non-Marxist principles, to which Badiou counts essentialist class politics, representative State politics, economic planning, and asymmetrical warfare. The crisis of Marxism has been produced by an »active semblance of a fusion of the point and the social bond« (C 1), an imaginary projection of the act of scission into the act of representation. The torsion of Marxism undoes this semblance, in which party and State fictively represented the historical victory of the masses.

The figure of the equivocation immanent to Marxism's referents allowing for an separation of Marxism from its semblance is strategically used by Badiou, in order to separate Marxist from Stalinist politics. Written in the timespan between 1982 and 1984, *Can politics be thought?* is a theoretical instrument to attack the spreading anti-Marxist triumphalism, in particular in the version produced by the *nouveaux philosophes*, former members of *gauche prolétarienne* who turned from Maoism to western parliamentarism by establishing a discourse of anti-totalitarianism. Badiou's strategy to combat this discourse starts from the hypothesis that »[t]he denunciation of terror cannot be the radical critique of the politics that grounds it« (C 3). After a symptomatic reading of Solzhenitsyn with Shalamov pinpointing Solzhenitsyn's reactionary mysticism, Badiou purifies Marxist politics from the problem of Stalinism: In the last instance, Stalinism hasn't been the effect of Marxist politics but of the absence of Marxist politics, the nationalisation and militarisation of the anti-imperialist movements haven't been the effect of the anti-imperialist practices but of the deployment of bourgeois techniques of warfare and bureaucracy.

In Badiou's torsion of Marxism remains concealed that that, what he calls the step by step collapse of the referents of Marxism, has been a step by step conflict. Each problem he refers to—the problem of the State, of the dictatorship of the proletariat, of the

marginalisation of the soviets, of economism, planning, militarisation—has been disputed in the international communist movement since its very first years and led to conflicts, splits and extreme modes of internal and external violence. The Heideggerian pathos of Marxism's *Verwindung* is led by Badiou to the cathartic paradox of Marxism's purity.

This paradox of a crisis of Marxism without Marxism is paradigmatically incorporated by the Polish workers' movement and *Solidarnosc* which present, to Badiou's view, at the extreme limit of Marxism the anti-Marxist Marxism of today: »We must take note [...] of the fact«, Badiou writes, »that this almost chemically pure workerist political thinking has taken a stance against Marxism-Leninism. The workers' movement itself, politically constituted through massive events, organized its own thinking in a radical foreignness from Marxism-Leninism« (C 11).

At this point, Badiou announces that Marxism has fulfilled the historical task posed to it by its crisis. It resurjects in exteriority to its doctrine, it has become the subject of its own destruction, it has destroyed the political philosopheme of class and people founded in the categories of social relationship, social bond, and the gathering of social forces. Marxism has realized itself as its own exception. It has cut a hole into itself and has freed itself from its three classical sources: German idealism, English political economy, French socialism. Hence, the universal meaning of the Polish workers movement is determined by Badiou as the recommencement of Marxism in »a new still silent configuration« that is atypical, delocalized and errant vis a vis the framework of Marxism's historical referents. The incorporation of the motif of victory by the State is undone and simultaneously historically exhausted. Victory as a principle of politics resulting from the bloody defeats of the workers movement, the defeat of the June insurrection and the Paris commune, is substituted by new principles that according to Badiou occurred with the Chinese cultural revolution and the events in Poland and Iran, yet are still to be deciphered and certified.

The thesis I propose to discuss is that Badiou is unable to show, how each attribute of politics is defined by an immanent limit, at which it can decompose into a reactive mode, hence has to be interrupted by the force of a different attribute of politics. The postmaoist guerilla EZLN might serve as example here; it interrupted the attribute of armed struggle at the limit, at which it opens to the logic of militarisation and death. The absolutisation of the point and its primacy over the limit disables Badiou to think the internal differential of practice and makes him compose his thought of the multiple being of truth in form of a composition of logically and existentially absolutised choices.

ad 3, Marx's hypothesis

At the end of the first part of *Can politics be thought?*, Badiou heads toward the question of what insists and persists in the name of Marx after the closure of the »cycle of Marxification« and the collapse of its historical referents. The new, yet silent configuration of Marxism constituted outside the Marxist apparatus validates for him Marx's »founding hypothesis« (C 17). To de(con)struct Marxism thus consists in dissolving the expressive bond it has instituted between the social and the political by re-

employing its first and original hypothesis: »There is a political capacity adapted to non-domination.« (C 17)

Compared with Balibar's early 1980s elaborate reading of Marx through the antinomies of his thinking, Badiou proposes a simple operation: Instead of founding politics in the economico-critical analysis of the capitalist mode of production, one has to found politics in the subjective capacity of everyone to think the consequences immanent to an event. Badiou strictly separates analytical description and political prescription. Between socio-economic analysis and politics, there is no nexus. Badiou's Marxism thus contracts to the following minimal definition:

»Marxism is the consistency of a political subject, of a heterogeneous political capacity. It is the life of a hypothesis« (C 13)

At stake is the status of condition in materialist thinking. While Balibar reads Marx through the theoretical displacements he produced by attempting to think the historical tendency that links together the theory of exploitation and revolution — an attempt defined by Balibar as aporetic yet uncircumventable hallmark of Marxism —, Badiou dissolves Marx's short-circuit between economic analysis and revolutionary demand. He presents Marx as thinker of political autonomy. If Marx claims that »[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past« (B), Badiou replies, the essence of politics is to immediately unbind from these circumstances. Hence, man is not «the ensemble of the social relations« (F) but its interruption and exception. In *Can politics be thought?*, the single condition, under which Badiou determines politics to stand, is the condition of an event termed as »There is«, as »breaking point of a real« (C 16), wherefrom a political sequence opens up. Badiou combines Heidegger's term of *There is (Es gibt)* with Lacan's term of the real, in order to define the event: it remains ungraspable except in the irruptive suspension of the social order that will vanish, as long as it is not retroactively certified.

Ultimately, Badiou presents a heretic limit-reading of Marxism through one sentence of the *Communist Manifesto* declaring Marx to be the first who thought politics as supplementation of an event through the retroactive materialisation of its consequences. Badiou claims that by emphasizing that »[t]he communists do not form a party distinct from other workers' parties«, Marx pinpointed that communism is no doctrine, fraction or program but the political attribute immanent to the workers' insurrections of the 1830s and 1840s. Chanced upon the revolutionary artisans of Paris, Marx would have posed the question, what are the criteria and principles by which the political consistency of the workers' movement can be established. At bottom, Badiou presents Marx as thinker of the communist party defining it to be the »general attribute«, the »specific, irreducible dimension« (C 15) by which the workers' movement gains consistency:

»There resides [Marx's] interpretive operation, the one that formulates the truth of proletarian politics, and whose conceptual name is that of communist party.« (C 16)

Correspondingly, in *Can politics be thought?* the task of a new Marxism to come is

defined as determining the communist attribute immanent to today's struggles that cannot be the party whose effectivity has been exhausted during the period of »Marxification«.

For our discussion, I propose the following thesis:

The idealisation of politics immanent to Badiou's minimal Marxism can be discussed on the basis of the correlation he establishes between the infinite and the Two in the course of his writings following on *Can politics be thought?*. Through a couple of theoretical operators—the void as proper name of inconsistent being, the distinction between structure and metastructure, the politicality of the singular term belonging to the situation without being included, the evental site defined as being composed of elements none of whose own elements belong to the site, and through the theoretical operator of points—Badiou idealises politics as being uncontaminated from the mechanisms, against which it acts. As the impossible made possible, as the inexistent brought into existence, as the choice of the choice, the materialisation of consequences remains purified from the effects of the conditions, they fight. Nothing but the existentialist exposition to and logical verification of the consequences that an evental wonder made thinkable by suspending the laws of being and appearance, politics is out of this world.

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S Louis Althusser: »Spinoza«

C Alain Badiou: »Can politics be thought?«, First part: Destruction (translation draft)

CT Alain Badiou: »Can politics be thought?«, Threshold (translation draft)

ETB Alain Badiou: The Event as Trans-Being in *Theoretical Writings*

O Alain Badiou: One, Multiple, Multiplicities in *Theoretical Writings*

LW Alain Badiou: Logics of Worlds

F Karl Marx: Theses on Feuerbach

B Karl Marx: The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte