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Review of Alain Badiou's *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, trans. David Macey (London: Verso, 2009).

"He was trying to extract from the present the possibilities opened up by a philosophy or a philosopher, and he would ratify his judgments and accept the results of his experiments." (42)

The writing of one philosopher directly on another often faces the risk of either making the historical thinker entirely subordinate to the writer's project, or remaining a stale repetition of a classic figure. Deleuze's own famous approach to this problem—writing so as to 'bugger' a thinker and produce a monstrosity—found a successful alternative to these two options, producing a number of classic works on the history of philosophy. In *Pocket Pantheon* Alain Badiou confronts his own relation to the history of recent philosophy. The work collects together a series of meditations by Badiou on various figures that have been crucial to his own philosophical development, from well-known influences like Deleuze, Sartre and Althusser, to lesser known inspirations such as Jean Borreil and Gilles Châtelet.

The epigraph above comes from Badiou's commemorative piece on Jean Hyppolite, yet the sentiment applies equally as well to Badiou's own grappling with the historical legacies of the postwar philosophers. Each essay forms a precise intervention in a thinker's work, taking their historical efforts and using them to shine light on the present political conjuncture.

An interesting undercurrent lies throughout the book though, as Badiou makes clear from the start that the texts are "all tributes to great minds, often paid to mark their passing, the anniversary of their passing or a colloquium devoted to their memory" (xi). The void of death, in other words, is palpable throughout the work. Yet Badiou is clear that the context of these works shouldn't lead one to be given over to the sad passions, but rather should be taken to remind one of the truly philosophical and affirmative nature of each thinker's life work. At one point, Badiou relates a conversation with Hyppolite over death, with the latter uncharacteristically melancholy over the possibility and with Badiou affirming his utter lack of concern over the possibility (52). In an earlier point, Badiou declares, "Death is no more than one possible and neutral conclusion because, as Spinoza states, 'A free man thinks of nothing less than death, and his wisdom is a meditation on life, not on death'" (11). Rejecting the Heideggerian obsession

with finitude and being-towards-death, Badiou instead affirms the infinite and non-individual nature of truth.

In this regard, we might see each piece as emanating from the void left by a thinker's death, but oriented towards the precisely non-individual aspects of their work: the eternal truths they brought forth, and their implications for the specific situation we find ourselves in now. The question of what this specific situation is comprised of is delineated in part by the inclusion of 'postwar' in the subtitle of the book, yet there is a significant ambiguity in this word. On the one hand, many of the works are written during the long post-WWII period, where the communist project retained empirical existence though its main Soviet and Chinese variants. The failures of these emancipatory projects are undeniable, yet the Cold War period—and the texts written within it—were at least tinted by the existence of an alternative to the dominant Western economic system. The post-WWII period is therefore a matter of examining and appraising really existing movements for Badiou, with a number of commentaries focusing on the Maoist project as well as the decline of the *Parti Communiste Français*.

Yet the collection also includes a number of texts written (and here is the second meaning of 'postwar') post-Cold War. The collapse of the USSR and the demise of the state-run economies as a viable system drastically altered the political imperatives. Interestingly enough, it is in the post-Cold War period that Badiou's own philosophical emphasis on the event, as the fleeting emergence of something which refuses being framed in terms of the present situation, makes the most sense—despite Badiou's major work on the event (*Being and Event*) being written three years before the collapse of the USSR (1988). As Adrian Johnston has recently made clear, Badiou's political project is one utterly suited to the purportedly 'post-ideological' situation we currently exist within.[1] In the absence of alternatives, radical and unpredictable breaks from the situation are the way forward for any truly emancipatory project. In this regard, the texts written in the post-Cold War phase are filled with a sense of this longing and a sense of this closure of possibility. As Badiou asks in his 1998 tribute to Jean-François Lyotard, "Who, in the darkness in which we find ourselves, and which is the obsolescence and erasure of politics, watches over the morning, wearing out and destroying the night" (100)?

In this respect, it is clear that for Badiou any political situation is more or less saturated with one overriding political concern—what he has recently termed the 'communist hypothesis' (though references to the 'communist idea' (30) make an appearance in these early essays as well). As he has said in his recent book, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, "If the communist hypothesis is not right, if it is not practicable, well, that means that humanity is not a thing in itself, not very different from ants or termites."[2] The communist hypothesis, as the assertion of radical egalitarian justice, is one of the few truths which give properly human life

[1] Adrian Johnston, *Badiou, Žižek, and Political Transformations: The Cadence of Change* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2009).
[2] Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, trans. David Fernbach (New York: Verso, 2008), 101.

to our otherwise animal existence. As a result, we can sum up by declaring that the singularity of each thinker presented in *Pocket Pantheon* is therefore doubly oriented: both towards the specific political conjuncture of the present moment (the postwar moment, in all its ambiguity), and towards the eternality of the communist hypothesis.

From this double orientation emanating from singularity, it is possible to read a number of crucial political imperatives that Badiou extracts from these thinkers. As is common throughout his work, one of the overriding themes is that of commitment and enthusiasm.[3] Echoing his own idiosyncratic mixture of rigid formalism with radical politics, Badiou notes in his piece on Jean Cavaillès that the rigorously asubjective mathematical logic of the latter led him to the most extreme forms of resistance against the Nazi occupation. This commitment to radical causes originated precisely because he refused the Ego and philosophies of human consciousness in favour of a dialectics of concepts. Reiterating the importance of this non-egoistic politics, Badiou writes that, "What makes politics a universal possibility: being able to attach so little importance to oneself even though an undeniable historical cause demands our devotion. If we do not meet that demand, we sacrifice not only our dignity, but all ethics and, ultimately, all logic and therefore all thought" (12). Similarly, in Althusser Badiou locates the significance of militant action and discourse: "Because it related to the imperative need for action which time was running out, the self-image of Althusser's thought used the military categories of advances and retreats, territorial gains, decisive engagements, strategy and tactics" (54).

The aim of such categories is to marshal the non-existent—which Badiou praises Derrida for focusing on as well, arguing that they were very close on this point. The proletariat, Badiou argues, is precisely 'nothing' and its aim is to alter the situation such as to bring about its existence within political appearances. "This is the very definition of Revolution: a non-existent uses its being-multiple in order to declare that it will exist in the absolute sense. And for that to happen, we have to change the world of course, change the world's transcendental" (141).

The question that necessarily remains, however, is how such a transformation is to be achieved. Within these essays, Badiou lays out at least three possible means, yet only one appears to offer a truly transformational potential. The first such means is the party-form, which Badiou still remains attached to in a number of the earlier essays, even arguing that "the party is a specific process internal to the masses, but it brings about a particular break: the break known as politics, as communism" (32). This intimate link between the party and communism has been severed within Badiou's later work, however, with Badiou now claiming that the party-form was appropriate to the Maoist period but that the task of contemporary communism must be to create a new organizational form.

[3] A theme also taken up in-depth in Alberto Toscano's excellent recent book *Fanaticism: On the Uses of an Idea* (London: Verso, 2010).

The second means to altering the transcendental stems from Badiou's claim that "politics is not the realm of power, it is the realm of thought. Its goal is not transformation; its goal is the creation of possibilities that could not be previously formulated" (98). Such a concept of politics sees action occurring at a theoretical level, a level of abstraction from concrete realities. The risk in such a formulation is that it misses two crucial aspects: first, the role of power and material relations in organizing the realm of possibilities, and second, the role of inhuman materiality in creating novel possibilities—it is not merely a matter of thought as thinkers like Bruno Latour have repeatedly made clear. Such a conception of politics reveals its impotence when faced with crises like the current financial collapse. Outside of thought, the situation has been altered by the complex intertwining of technological systems and geopolitical reverberations (the rise of authoritarian capitalism, for instance), yet the acknowledgement of such changes in the possible is precluded by Badiou's concept of politics.

In that regard, the third and final means of transformation offers the best way forward, sidestepping the problems of the previous two. In a short section on Hyppolite, Badiou notes the importance of institutional interventions that Hyppolite continually affirmed: "[Hyppolite] thought that one of the École's possible vocations was to intervene, as an institutional site, in the process that would one day lead to negotiations and peace. He therefore had an interventionist conception of the institution. I admire this superior Hegelianism, the idea that the destiny of the institution is not its immobility but its ability to concentrate the historical idea itself" (48-9). This short statement of admiration from Badiou on the notion of institutional intervention brings to mind the schizoanalytic experimentation affirmed by both Deleuze and Guattari—a form of politics which has only too rarely been practiced or theorized. Yet it is precisely within the institutional structures of the modern world that many of the most important changes and challenges arise. Such action involves institutions, intrinsically, in both their social embeddedness as well as their material conditions. Moreover, a network-centric frame of thought must recognize the way in which institutional experimentation can produce ripples of change throughout a system. In short, institutions can and should intervene in the course of history—precisely as the point at which the voluntarism of romantic revolutionaries can be extended into long-standing changes in social organization.

In affirming this primacy of institutions, one also encroaches upon what might be considered Badiou's own form of hermeneutics—namely, the use of salvageable materials from the existing past in order to construct the future. This conception makes itself clear in Badiou's own revision of truth. Truth, for Badiou, is not something that emerges *ex nihilo*, but instead is something that must be slowly and patiently constructed. A truth procedure consists precisely in taking the existing elements of a situation and reconfiguring them in light of a non-existent (evental) element. The result is a new part of the situation, a new subset, which can then be forced into the existing situation, extending it beyond its present limitations. The past, in other words, does not act solely as a residual

bygone era, but instead forms the concrete material upon which truth and politics must work. In this light, the present landscape of organizational and institutional material offers the crucial ingredients in moving beyond temporary gestures of revolutionary enthusiasm and instead establishing real shifts in social organization. Novelty and change are enacted through our relation to the past.

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