

BRUNO BOSTEELS (2011) *BADIOU AND POLITICS*. DURHAM & LONDON: DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS. ISBN: 978-0-8223-5076-7.

Kevin D. Kuswa

The ambitious challenge taken on and met by *Badiou and Politics* is to add to one of a handful of meta-tropes defining our current era *and* to add to an already sizable literature base surrounding one of the world's most significant continental philosophers and living theorists. Bruno Bosteels meets this challenge head on by dividing the major uptake on Badiou's work into two primary trajectories: the 'being' camp that stresses the logical ontology of oneness as pure multiplicity, and the 'event' camp that traces the ways a subject assumes certain truths as situations prompt particular procedures. Once Bosteels has set up these two approaches, he proposes a third way to encounter Badiou. Bosteel's corrective borrows from both approaches, settling on an affirmation of the politics of a dialectical materialism that would deploy both 'being' and 'event' strategies in a substantial reanimation of Badiou's place on, and contribution to, the philosophical map. This project goes beyond academic intervention for Bosteels, who shows how his friendship with Badiou springs from a passion and connection to his ideas that enriches both of them.

Politics is a tough topic to tackle on any level. Badiou is a tough thinker to engage with. Bosteels unites, complements, and distinguishes both in his 436-page book working through the theories of a thinker who himself is grappling directly with politics: politics as an event, politics as being, and politics as one of four truth procedures defining the subject. Following and resisting many of the paths blazed by Deleuze and Guattari, Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, and Butler among others, the works of Badiou feature a deeper philosophical conversation about being, power, time, and subjectivity led by earlier giants such as Heidegger, Marx, and Mao, even stretching back further to logical binarisms represented by Plato and Aristotle, or the 'plus one' practices of St. Paul within

Christianity. The one—or militantly singular entity—for Badiou, is simultaneously multiple (zero implies one, one implies two) in a mathematical dialogue analogous to the ways a material dialectic constitutes subjectivity. Such a move is reminiscent of the subjectivities generated by the segmented line, ruptured line, and line of flight for Deleuze and Parnet (1983), converting a rhizome into a particular equation of multiplicity and truth.

Prior to the chapter entitled 'For Lack of Politics,' we find only a sprinkling of Bosteels' direct engagement with Badiou—an engagement which happens to offer the most provocative moments of the larger effort to heighten the impact of Badiouian political thought. Until that point, the book is structured along a split between the question of being versus the question of the event and the ways in which other theorists, many of them Badiou's contemporaries, map similar concepts and squeeze their way in and out of Badiou's contributions. Bosteels aptly observes that being can be 'defined as the event of the open or as a point of the real' and, moreover, 'one can gain access to it by way of interpreting a poem or by formalizing the signifier' (189). There is room for manoeuvre here and the critics of Badiou who claim he lapses into a rigidity conducive to authoritarianism lose their grounding because 'truth, in order to become effective in the situation, must be forced' (189) and this 'forcing' is different from other theories of radical politics because it does not vacate a given event or evacuate the subject from truth. Instead, in a more radical ballooning of the excess and the lack, 'the event itself ultimately comes to coincide with being and with truth. This means to both ontologize the event and to eventalize being' (191).

The question of how to theorize politics and how to read Badiou on politics percolates through a number of filters before emerging late in the book under the section 'Future Tasks for Thinking Politics'. It is here where Bosteels has his most poignant insights and begins to add his own position to the mix through an intervention into and on behalf of 'radical democracy'. Following Bosteels' call to 'historically and conceptually... map out the specific events—political and otherwise—whose configuration mark what we call our present' (269), it is instructive to note Badiou's comments on one of those significant events, the Arab Spring and the youth movements circulating throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The event itself, perhaps sparked by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation but also spurred on by decades of authoritarian rule and economic exploitation, has generated a new surge of popular protest that we

could associate with radical democracy as a break from the IMF-led forms of electoral democracy that propped up the old order. Badiou himself has made this point recently, but more importantly for our understanding of politics through Bosteels' perspective, Badiou) distinguishes the politics of the Arab Spring from the external puppeteering of the parliamentary-capitalists:

Isn't it laughable to see these dutiful intellectuals, these soldiers dispatched from the capitalist-parliamentary system which we treat as some kind of moth-eaten paradise, offer themselves to the magnificent people of Tunisia and Egypt to teach these savages the ABCs of 'democracy'? (2011)

It is certainly laughable (and tragic) to witness the righteousness of these democracy experts given the portrayal in the West that the Arab world has finally decided to adopt democracy, even though the same Western allies of the movement are turning their backs on the Muslim Brotherhood candidate, Mohammed Morsi, elected to the Presidency in Egypt. Bosteels sheds light on these characterizations when he describes Badiou's theory of the event as an oscillation between Foucault's ontology of actuality and Heidegger's deconstruction of metaphysics. In other words, an event like the Arab awakening must be absorbed and acknowledged in two competing ways: completely in the moment (the heat of passion) and completely decontextualized (the detachment of premeditation or historical determinism). This means taking into account the raw force of the 'prairie fire' (Badiou, 2011) ignited in Tunisia and the long pattern of adherence and resistance to the State in the region. Bosteels elaborates: 'What takes place is not only the singular event of being, ... not only the event of the gift of freedom, but a variety of events in the plural, the haphazard irruption of which has a specific site as their point of departure in history' (269).

The particular informs the generic and vice-versa in this instance, for the people's struggle for expression sweeping through Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond is also a larger rebellion following 'the only true political task: to face down the state with organised fidelity to movement communism' (Badiou, 2011). The general move is a rejection of democracy, but not one that would abandon the potential of its own excess. Badiou explains further in *The Communist Hypothesis*:

it is important to argue that such a rupture is always a rupture with the left, in the formal sense I have given to that term. Today, this amounts to saying a rupture with the representative form of politics, or, if one wants to go further in the way of founded provocation, a rupture with 'democracy'. (Badiou, 2010: 227)

The results, as events continue to unfold in Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere, demonstrate Bosteels' contention that what is needed 'is a revised principle of *equality* in action' (271). The notion here that acts of criticism immanent in radical democracy—even a radical democracy premised on the dialectic between subjects and procedures of subjectivity such as the movement between autocrats Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak in relation to 'the protestors' or 'the masses'—are somehow apolitical, infinitely impossible, or otherwise a means of ceding the political to dogmatism and retrenchment is patently false and a dangerous misconception. As we ultimately learn from Bosteels' emphasis on dialectical materialism's animation of the ontology of being and the praxis of the event, theoretical fidelity to history and change is the *only* way the political can make the unimaginable possible and design new horizons for emancipation.

These possibilities also abound in the two interviews included as appendices where Bosteels and then Bosteels and Peter Hallward pepper Badiou with a variety of questions and engage in pleasantly meandering conversation. There are three highlights. First, a discussion of the importance of May 1968 in France to the theory of the event occurs and the contradiction between the event as specific and the event as transhistorical. Second, Badiou's relationship to Maoism is explored in some depth, marking the parallels between the Cultural Revolution and the give and take between singularity and universalism. And third, Badiou's work on the importance of the present and the need to maintain a contemporary approach to time and philosophy is unpacked in terms of the twentieth century and its self-declared meanings, including a passion for the real, a rise in state sovereignty that is also spiritual, and the turn to a notion of subtraction instead of destruction to pinpoint some of the violent moments defining the twentieth century. Badiou urges us to attempt to 'understand where the possibility of these figures of the state comes from' and to avoid reducing 'these states to their extraordinary police function' (321). Among these highlights, readers will also enjoy the positioning of Badiou in relation to other

strands and theorists in the same vein, especially the ways Badiou practices fidelity to his early commitments to the revolutionary tide of '68, Maoism, and the process ('torsion') of movement communism.

Such movement communism (or, in some senses, a radical democracy) is not a universal ideal or the final representation of equality, but a potential tendency residing in the four discourses outlined by Althusser and modified by Badiou: the discourses of ideology, aesthetics, science, and the unconscious. This is an inspiring suggestion hinted at by Badiou and brought to life by *Badiou and Politics*. It is perhaps the single best reason to devote some serious energy to Bosteels' book. In sum, the suggestion is that politics, art, science, and love all deserve to be charted in a matrix based on Badiou's four central features of philosophy: event, structure, intervention, and fidelity. Run each discourse through the four concepts by interrogating a specific inquiry. Each discursive arrangement, then, would open a dialogue with the second grouping of concepts to produce sixteen boxes of analysis around a given particular. The process does not have to be linear or formulaic, but it does offer a comprehensive albeit provisional route toward extrapolation, explanation, and event-ual deconstruction.

References

Badiou, A. (2011). 'Tunisia, Egypt: When an east wind sweeps away the arrogance of the West,' *Le Monde*. Trans. Bat020. Bat020blog. 18 Feb. 2011. <http://bat020.com/2011/03/11/badiou-on-the-revolutions-in-egypt-and-tunisia/>. Accessed 28 Feb 2012.

Badiou, A. (2010). *The Communist Hypothesis*. Translated by D. Macey & S. Corcoran. London & New York: Verso Press.

Badiou, A. (2006). *Metapolitics*. Translated by J. Barker. London & New York: Verso Press.

Deleuze, G. & Parnet, C. (1983). 'Politics.' In G. Deleuze & F. Guattari (eds), *On the Line*. Translated by J. Johnston. New York: Semiotexte, pp. 69-114.