



Democracy and Disappointment: On the Politics of Resistance

The Contemporary Figure of the Soldier in Politics and Poetry

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On Badiou's Politics

Simon Critchley

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In any period of time, in any sequence of history, we have to maintain a relationship with what exceeds our possibilities; with what, as an idea, exists beyond the natural needs of the human animal. In crucial experiences, such as love, artistic creation, scientific discoveries, political struggle, we must exceed the limits of our vital and social determinations. We must encounter, within our own humanity, the obscure, violent, at the same time luminous and peaceful, element of inhumanity within the human element itself. That is why my friend Jean-François Lyotard wrote that the famous "human rights" are in fact "the rights of the infinite". For humanity is not reducible to animality, to the extent that the inhuman is a creative part of humanity. It is in the element of inhumanity that human creation shows that part of human nature which does not exist but must become; Humanity is never completely realized, is never something natural. Humanity is an infinite victory over its immanent element of inhumanity. To accept, to support, this experience of the inhuman element of ourselves, we must, all of us, human animals, use some imaginary means. We must create a symbolic representation of this humanity which exists beyond itself, in the fearsome and fertile element of the inhuman. I call that sort of representation a heroic figure. "Figure", because the action of a figure is a symbolic one. "Heroic", because heroism is properly the act of the infinite in human actions. "Heroism" is the clear appearance, in a concrete situation, of something which assumes its humanity beyond the natural limits of the human animal.

I firmly believe that our historical moment is disoriented. What does this mean? The previous century was defined by a terrible experience of the inhuman. The idea was to create at any cost a new world and a new man. The heroic figures, sometimes as frightening black figures, were elsewhere.

The word "revolution" was the synthesis of a destructive experiment. Communist revolution, the artistic destruction of all arts, the scientific and technological revolution, the sexual revolution...

The figure of the end of the old traditions was the heroism of destruction and the creation ex nihilo of a new real. Humanity itself was the new God. Today, all of this is in a state of total crisis. One of the symptoms of the crisis is the return of the old traditions and the appearance of the resurrection of old dead Gods. All the heroic figures are old ones, too, such as, for example religious sacrifice and bloody fanaticism. In the guise of these figures, nothing new can occur. They are aligned with a disjunction between the human and the inhuman, and not of an integration of the inhuman in a new sequence of the historical existence of humanity. But the absence of any sort of heroic figure is by no means any better than the old sacrifice.

We have got the strict inhumanity of technological murder and bureaucratic supervision of all aspects of life instead. We have got bloody wars, without any form of conviction or faith. In fact, without an active figure with an element of symbolic creative value, we have got a dark war between the old religious sacrifice and the blind will of capitalistic control.

That is why we need to think about the fate of heroic figures. Our problem can be formalized in new terms. In disoriented times, we cannot accept the return of the old, deadly figure of religious sacrifice; but neither can we accept the complete lack of any figure, and the complete disappearance of any idea of heroism.

In both cases, the consequences will be the end of any dialectical relationship between humanity and its element of inhumanity, in a creative mode. So the result will be the sad success of what Nietzsche named "the last man." "The last man" is the exhausted figure of a man devoid of any figure. It is the nihilistic image of the fixed nature of the human animal, devoid of all creative possibility.

Our task is: How can we find a new heroic figure, which is neither the return of the old figure of religious or national sacrifice, nor the nihilistic figure of the last man? Is there a place, in a disoriented world, for a new style of heroism?

But we have to begin from the beginning: the analysis of the most important features of the figures during the last historical sequence.

The following:

1. The paradigm of the site of heroism has been war.
2. The paradigm of all heroic figures during the revolutionary sequence was the Soldier.
3. This figure of the Soldier was a creation of the past two centuries. Because precisely, the heroic figure "war" was not the Soldier, but the Warrior.
4. The creative value of the figure of the Soldier is illustrated by poetry.
5. In contemporary images (movies, television and so on), we notice a nostalgia for the Warrior, which is a sign of individual nihilism.
6. The great problem is to create a paradigm of heroism beyond war, but not by a return to the Christian pacifism.

The old figure of heroism, before the great French Revolution was the figure of the individual warrior. It was the central figure in all the great epic poems of all countries. It is not a figure of collective discipline relationship to an Idea. It is a figure of affirmation of the self, promotion of a visible superiority. It is not a figure of creative freedom. Rather, the classical hero, in the form of the warrior, assumes his destiny. The figure of the warrior is a combination of victory and destiny, of superiority and obedience. The warrior is strong, but he has no real choice concerning the use of his strength. And often his death is atrocious and without any clear meaning. The figure of the warrior is beyond humanity, because it is between the human animal and the Gods. It is not really a creation, but rather a sort of place, resulting from a whim of the Gods. It is an aristocratic figure.

The French Revolution replaced the individual and aristocratic figure of the warrior with the democratic and collective figure of the soldier. This was a new imaginary of the relationship between the human and the inhuman. The great notion was the "levée en masse"; the turning out of all the revolutionary people against the enemies. The collective dimension of this figure is essential. The soldier has no proper name. It is a conscient part of a great discipline, under the power of the Idea. Finally, he is anonymous. You know that in Paris, under the Arc de Triomphe, there is a perpetual flame, which celebrates the Unknown Soldier. It is the very essence of the symbolic figure of the soldier to be unknown. The fundamental dimension of the figure of the soldier is precisely the dialectical unity between courageous death and immortality, without reference either to a personal soul or to a God. It is democratic glory, which creates something immortal with collective and anonymous courage. We can speak here of an immanent immortality.

Naturally, this is a poetic idea. From romantic poetry we are familiar with the idea of something eternal within the poetical experiment of our world, and not in an other sacred world. So we have a lot of poets, from Victor Hugo to Wallace Stevens, by way of Hopkins and Charles Peguy, who sang the soldier as a glorious and anonymous figure.

This artistic transformation of the figure of the soldier is important, because in fact it is also a political gesture. Certainly the figure of the soldier has been paradigmatic during all the revolutionary sequence of politics. To be "the soldier of the revolution" was a common conviction. So here, poetry, as often, clarifies political subjectivity.

I have chosen for you just two poems. First an English one, written by Gerard Manley Hopkins in 1888; and then an American one, written by Wallace Stevens in 1944. What these two poems have in common is the idea of a sort of reciprocity between the heroism of the soldier and an anonymous non-religious victory over death.

The Soldier

Yes. Why do we all, seeing of a soldier, bless him? bless
Our redcoats, our tars? Both these being, the greater part,
But frail clay, nay but foul clay. Here it is: the heart,
Since, proud, it calls the calling manly, gives a guess
That, hopes that, makesbelieve, the men must be no less;
It fancies, feigns, deems, dears the artist after his art;
And fain will find as sterling all as all is smart,
And scarlet wear the spirit of war there express.

Mark Christ our King. He knows war, served this soldiering through;
He of all can handle a rope best. There he bides in bliss
Now, and seeing somewhere some man do all that man can do,
For love he leans forth, needs his neck must fall on, kiss,
And cry 'O Christ-done deed! So God-made-flesh does too:
Were I come o'er again' cries Christ 'it should be this'.

The Death of a Soldier

Life contracts and death is expected,
As in a season of autumn.
The soldier falls.

He does not become a three-days personage,
Imposing his separation,
Calling for pomp.

Death is absolute and without memorial,
As in a season of autumn,
When the wind stops,

When the wind stops and, over the heavens,
The clouds go, nevertheless,
In their direction.

Just three comments:

1) As far as Hopkins is concerned, the question is clearly the question of a figure, of a paradigm. Everybody blesses the soldier, everybody blesses the pure appearance of the soldier: uniform, redcoats, scarlet... It is because this appearance is "the spirit of war".

2) Why is the "spirit of war" so important? It is because it is the expression of human capacities, beyond risk, beyond death. It is a situation in which the human being is as complete and victorious as God himself was under the name of "Christ". In the anonymous soldier, we can see "some man do all that man can do". The very essence of humankind is achieved in the guise of the soldier.

3. But this essence of humankind is beyond simple achieving. It is something like a transformation. In the act of the soldier, we have something eternal; exactly as in the death of Christ, we have the Resurrection, the new life. It is the cry of God himself seeing the soldier: "O Christ - done deed!"

Finally we can say that the soldier is a metaphor, which contains three fundamental features of the human being when he or her is seized by Truth. First, it is an example for everybody, it is a universal address; second, it is an example of what can be done by somebody, when it is thought that nothing is possible; it is the creation of a new possibility; third, it is an example of what is immortal, or eternal, in an action which is devoted to a true Idea. It is the creation of an immanent immortality.

We can find all this in Stevens too, but in a more melancholic fashion. Wallace Stevens is, in my opinion, your greatest poet. He was born in 1879. So he was a young man during the First World War. And he died in 1955, so he also knew the horrible massacres of the Second World War. He is a contemporary of the culmination, but also of the end of the universality of the figure of the soldier. We can see that in Stevens's titles during this period. In 1943 Stevens publishes a collection under the title *Part of a World*. As you see, we have the idea of the end of the world as a clear totality. In the collection, we find the question of the hero. A great poem examines the hero in wartime. And the conclusion is uncertain. Today's poem is from his next published collection, *Transport to summer*. "Summer" in Stevens is always the name of affirmation, exactly as the sun is the name of this point where Being and Appearing are practically the same.

The war is the end of the evidence of the sun, and of the purely affirmative summer. The question is: how, after all that, can a transport to summer exist? Can we hope, once more, after the death of the paradigmatic soldier, for something like the true appearance of Being and affirmative thinking? The title of the poem we are reading

today is a French title, *Esthétique du Mal*. It is a quotation from Baudelaire. We see that the poem is between Beauty (*esthétique*) and Evil (*Mal*). The figure of the soldier is found in the Seventh Stanza of *Esthétique du Mal*.

Let us read this Stanza.

How red the rose that is the soldier's wound
The wounds of many soldiers, the wounds of all
The soldiers that have fallen, red in blood,
The soldier of time grown deathless in great size.

A mountain in which no ease is ever found,
Unless indifference to deeper death
Is ease, stands in the dark, a shadows' hill
And there the soldier of time has deathless rest.

Concentric circles of shadows, motionless,
Of their own part, yet moving on the wind,
Form mystical convolutions in the sleep
Of time's red soldier deathless on his bed.

The shadows of his fellow ring him round
In the high night, the summer breathes for them
Its fragrance, a heavy somnolence, and for him,
For the soldier of time, it breathes a summer sleep,

In which his wound is good because life was.
No part of him was ever part of death.
A woman smooths her forehead with her hand
And the soldier of time lies calm beneath that stroke.

Once again, three comments:

1. The soldier is not represented here as in Hopkins, by his appearance or by his act. He is represented by wounds and death. The colour is the colour of blood. Yet, we have a positive transformation. The wound is formalized by the rose ("How red the rose that is the soldier's wound"). And the wound itself, like the rose, is a symbol of the grace of life: "the wound is good because life was". So the soldier is an affirmative mediation between death and life.

2. The soldier is composed of time. Every soldier is a "soldier of time". It is because war, modern war, does not comprise brilliant battles with great warriors, but a long period of suffering for millions of anonymous soldiers. Yet, this time creates something beyond time; this death creates something beyond death. The whole poem establishes a relationship between time and immortality.

"The soldier of time grown deathless in great size." We have here the ultimate force of the figure. There is in the soldier something great, because it creates a link between time and deathlessness.

3. And finally, we can say that the soldier is a new form of the evidence of the sun, of the creative power of summer. The summer is present in the night of death: "In the high night, the summer breathes for them / Its fragrance, a heavy somnolence, and for him, / For the soldier of time, it breathes a summer sleep." The dying soldier remains untouched by death: "no part of him was ever part of death." That is why the soldier is not at all in the form of religious sacrifice. He is life itself, the rose, the summer in the night.

What can we conclude from all this? The soldier has been the modern symbol of two very important features of the capacity of human beings to create something beyond their own limits. First, this creation can be immanent, and not dependent on religious faith. Second, this creation is eternal in time itself, and not after time.

But the limit of the figure is clear in the two poems. With Hopkins, we have a Christian paradigm. The soldier repeats the act of death and resurrection. Man can be a God, says Hopkins. But what, if God is dead, as Nietzsche teaches all of us? With Stevens, we have a melancholic survival of summer and sun, expressed by a poetic transfiguration of wounds and death. But what, if war, in our days, has become an obscure slaughter?

The poetic transfiguration of the soldier is also the beautiful beginning of the end of this figure. Our task is a very precise one. We are after the period of the aristocratic warrior, and after the period of the democratic soldier, but we are not in a peaceful end of History. On the contrary, we live in confusion, violence and injustice. We must create new symbolic forms for our collective actions. Probably not in the context of global negation and final war, but in the context of local affirmation and endless conflicts. We must find a new sun, in other words, a new mental country. As Stevens says; "The sun is the country wherever he is."

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On Badiou's Politics

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For the philosopher, the world has arguably always been a disappointing place full of dumb people. Heraclitus was traditionally known as the Weeping Philosopher because his fellow citizens of Ephesus refused to follow the *logos*, the law, principle or reason that governs the universe. Instead, they acted as if they were asleep and had no awareness of what they are doing, like chaff-munching donkeys. Heraclitus became such a hater of humanity that he wandered into the mountains and lived on a diet of grass and herbs before dying suffocated in cow dung. Empedocles, the great political radical, turned his back on the people of Agrigentum and threw himself into Mount Etna in the hope of being transformed into a god (sadly, one of his bronze slippers was spat out by the volcano in confirmation of his mortality). Anaxagoras suggested that mind or *nous* was the moving principle of the universe and counseled his fellow citizens of Miletus to study the moon, sun and stars. When someone asked him, 'Have you no concern with your native land?', he replied, 'I am greatly concerned with my native land' and pointed to the stars. He was banished from Miletus after a trial where the charge was that he claimed the sun to be a mass of red-hot metal. In the famous Seventh Letter, Plato writes about his two visits to Syracuse where he was invited to educate the young ruler, Dionysius II. There is a story told that such was Dionysius' appreciation of Plato's efforts, that he sold him into slavery and was only saved by being ransomed by the Cyrenaic philosopher Anniceris. Everyone knows that Socrates was famously condemned to death for impiety and corrupting the youth of Athens. It is less well known that a couple of generations later, during the uprisings against Macedonian rule that followed the death of Alexander the Great in 323 b.c.e., Alexander's former tutor, Aristotle, escaped Athens saying, 'I will not allow the Athenians to sin twice against philosophy'.

It is therefore something of an understatement to assert that the relation between philosophy and politics has always been a difficult one. In the *Republic*, Socrates wanders out of Athens with Plato's brothers and walks down to the port of Piraeus, leaving the city behind them. After quickly demolishing the prevailing views of justice in Athenian society, Socrates proceeds to dream of another city in dialogue, a just city governed by philosophers whose souls would be orientated towards the Good. This is why the standard objection to Plato that the ideal of the philosophical city is unrealistic, utopian or impossible to realize is so fatuous. Of course, the philosophers' city is utopian. That's the point. Indeed, one might go a little further and claim that it is the duty of philosophy to build conceptual castles that allow us to imagine that another city and another world are possible, however difficult that may be to achieve in practice. As the saying goes, you are either utopian or a schmuck.

Alain Badiou is no schmuck. Moreover, he is a Platonist, which is something that it is very important to keep in mind when reading his political writings assembled in *Polemics* or *Circonstances* in French, which is my focus in this essay.

The source of Badiou's considerable appeal lies in the understanding of philosophy that he defends. He writes that, 'Philosophy is something that helps change existence'. Philosophy is neither technical and largely irrelevant logic-chopping nor is it deconstructive, melancholic poeticizing, what Badiou calls, 'the delights of the margin'. On the contrary, philosophy is an affirmative, constructive discipline of thought. Crucially, this is thought 'not about what is, but about what is not'. Philosophy is the construction of the formal possibility of something that would break with what Badiou calls the 'febrile sterility' of the contemporary world. This is what he calls an *event* and the only question of politics, for Badiou, is whether there is something that might be worthy of the name event. If philosophy, with Heracleitus, is understood as a 'seizure of thought of what breaks the sleep of thought', then politics is a revolutionary seizure of power which breaks with the dreamless sleep of an unjust and violently unequal world. As such, Badiou is not concerned with the banal reality of existing politics, which he tends to dismiss as 'the democratic fetish', but with moments of rare and evanescent political invention and creativity. Like Socrates, Badiou dreams of another city in speech and therefore to accuse him of being unrealistic is to refuse to undertake the experiment in thought that his philosophy represents.

Before turning more closely to what Badiou means by a politics of the event, let's consider a little further the world's febrile sterility. In *Polemics*, we find withering critiques and witty demolitions of the so-called war on terror, the invasion of Iraq, the bombardment of Serbia and the pantomime of parliamentary democracy, using the example of the French Presidential elections of 2002. There is a delightfully Swiftian satire on the Islamic headscarf or *foulard* affair and a savage and poignant denunciation of the racism that led to the riots in the Parisian *banlieues* late in 2005, 'We have the riots we deserve.' Many of the political writings are marked by a cool rationalism and a biting comedy. Badiou sees France as a politically 'sick' and 'disproportionately abject country' whose political reality is not located in the endlessly-invoked republican ideal of the Revolution, but in the reaction against it. For Badiou – and I think he is right – France is the country of Thiers' massacre of the Communards, Petain's collaboration with the Nazis and de Gaulle's colonial wars. As such, the victory of Sarkozy is an affirmation of Petainism and Le Penism and a continuation of the long war against the enemy within. In this connection, see the fourth volume of *Circonstances*, which has just appeared: *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*

As to what Badiou imagines as an alternative to the febrile sterility of the world and its increasingly orgiastic celebrations of social inequality, it is interestingly described as an 'Enlightenment, whose elements we are slowly assembling'. Such an Enlightenment can neither be understood as what Badiou calls 'state democracy', i.e. parliamentarism, nor 'state bureaucracy', the socialist party-state. Political struggle is, 'A tooth and nail fight to organize a united popular force'. This requires, and it is a word oft-repeated in these essays, 'discipline'. It is important to emphasize that this is not party discipline in the old Leninist sense. Rather, what is at issue here is the invention of a politics without party and at a distance from the state, a local politics that is concerned with the construction of a collectivity.

But what might this mean? In order to understand Badiou's idea of politics, I think it is necessary to consider his close proximity to another sometime Platonist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In my view, Badiou's understanding of politics is much more Rousseauian than Marxist. Let me list seven reasons for this claim:

- (i) *Formalism* - In *The Social Contract*, Rousseau, like Badiou, is trying to establish the *formal* conditions of a legitimate politics. The more Marxist or sociological question of the material conditions for such a politics is continually avoided.
- (ii) *Voluntarism* - In Badiou's view, Rousseau establishes the modern concept of politics which is based in the, 'act by which a people is a people,' as he puts it in *The Social Contract*. For Badiou, the key to Rousseau's idea of popular sovereignty consists in the act of collective and unanimous declaration where a people wills itself into existence. This act is an event understood as a collective subjective act of creation whose radicality consists in the fact that it does not originate in any structure supported within what Badiou calls 'being' or the 'situation', such as the socio-economic realm or the dialectic of relations and forces of production in Marx. The event of politics is the making of something out of nothing through the act of the subject. Badiou is a political voluntarist.
- (iii) *Equality* - Rousseau is the great thinker of what Badiou calls the 'generic,' which is a key concept in Badiou's system. Thought politically, the generic is not a particular maxim of action, but a universal norm: *equality*. For Badiou, true politics has to be based on the rigorous equality of all persons and be addressed to all. The means for the creation of a generic, egalitarian politics is the general will, conceived as that political subject whose act of unanimity binds a collectivity together. As Badiou writes, politics is 'about finding new sites for the general will'.

- (iv) *Locality* – From this follows a fourth important point of contact with Rousseau. Although the latter defends a generic politics understood as the act by which a people declares itself a people of equals and addresses itself to all, this can only be realized in a local manner. Badiou insists that true politics has to be intensely local and he is opposed to both delocalized capitalist globalization and its inverse in the so-called ant-globalization movement. But the fact that all politics is local does not mean that it is particular. On the contrary, Badiou, like Rousseau, argues for what we might call a local or situated universalism.
- (v) *Rarity* – The issue then becomes one of identifying a locale for politics. It is well known that Rousseau struggled to find examples of legitimate politics. For a while, he pinned his hopes on Geneva, until they started burning his books after the publication of *The Social Contract* in 1762. He also held out hopes for Corsica and wrote a fascinating speculative constitution for Poland, both of which ended in failure. If true politics is the act by which a people wills itself into existence as a radical and local break with what existed beforehand, then such a politics is rare. As we will see in a moment, the only real example of politics that Badiou gives is the Paris Commune.
- (vi) *Representation* - Badiou's reflections on the French elections of 2002 culminate in a rehearsal of Rousseau's arguments against representative, electoral government and majority rule in *The Social Contract*. For Rousseau and Badiou, the general or generic will cannot be represented, certainly not by any form of government. Politics, then, is not about governmental representation through the mechanism of the vote, but about the presentation of a people to itself. Badiou writes, 'The essence of politics, according to Rousseau, affirms presentation over and against representation'. The general will cannot be represented. Of course, this leads Rousseau to follow Plato in his critique of theatrical representation or *mimesis* and to argue instead for public festivals where the people would be the actors in their own political drama. What takes place in the public festival is the presence to itself of the people in the process of its enactment.
- (vii) *Dictatorship* - However, Badiou goes a step further with Rousseau, a step that I am not able to take. He does not just defend popular sovereignty, which is as controversial as apple pie in the modern era (just as long as no one puts it into practice, one might quip). Badiou also goes on to defend Rousseau's argument for

dictatorship sketched towards the end of Book IV of *The Social Contract*. Rousseau argues, thinking as ever of Roman history, that dictatorship is legitimate when there is a threat to the life of the body politic. At such moments of crisis, the laws which issue from the sovereign authority of the people can be suspended, what the Roman jurists called *iustitium*. Badiou's claim is slightly different and he writes that, 'Dictatorship is the natural form of organization of political will'. The form of dictatorship that Badiou has in mind is not tyranny, but what he calls 'citizenry discipline'. In other words, what Badiou is defending is what Marx, Lenin and Mao called 'the dictatorship of the proletariat'. Let's just say that I have my doubts about this final move in the argument.

The deeply Rousseauian character of Badiou's approach to politics becomes clear in the two extended and fascinating lectures that conclude *Polemics*: on the Paris Commune and the Chinese Cultural Revolution. In order to grasp Badiou's argument, it is essential to understand its precise periodization. What interests Badiou in the Paris Commune is 'the exceptional intensity of its sudden appearing'. Everything turns here on the moment in March 18th, 1871 when a group of Parisian workers who belonged to the National Guard refused to turn over their weapons to the government of Versailles. It is this moment of resistance and the subsequent election of the Commune government on March 26th that constitute a political event for Badiou. Politics is the making of something out of nothing through the act of a collective subject, what he calls the 'existence of an in-existent'.

It is this moment that is repeated – and very self-consciously repeated - in the Shanghai Commune in February 1967. This followed upon the intense power struggles within the Chinese Communist Party and Mao's mobilization of the Red Guards against what he saw as the 'revisionism' and bureaucratism of the regime. Although Badiou is very well aware that Mao ordered the dissolution of the Shanghai Commune and its replacement with a Revolutionary Committee controlled by the Party, it is this brief moment of the self-authorizing dictatorship of the proletariat that fascinates him.

What takes place in the Paris Commune is a moment of collective political self-determination. But, crucially, Badiou's understanding of the Commune is freed from Lenin's hugely influential critique in *State and Revolution*, where its failure is used to justify the Bolshevik seizure of state power in 1917. The same political logic is at work in the Shanghai Commune where, after having attempted to mobilize the masses politically, Mao criticizes the commune for 'extreme anarchism' and being 'most reactionary'. Badiou is acutely aware that the Cultural Revolution led to widespread barbarism, persecution and disaster.

So, what is politics, then? It is what Badiou calls an 'evanescent event', the act by which a people declares itself into existence and seeks to follow through on that declaration. We might say that politics is the commune and only the commune. Badiou writes, very Platonically, 'I believe this other world resides for us in the Commune'. It is this sudden transformation of the febrile sterility of the nothing of the world into a fecund something, this moment of radical rupture that obsesses Badiou, a seizure by thought in the event that is a seizure of power. Furthermore, this event doesn't last. After 72 days, the Paris Commune was crushed by the military forces of the future first President of the Third Republic, Alphonse Thiers. An estimated 20,000 Parisians were slaughtered.

It is this brief moment of politics without party and state that was repeated in a slightly different register in May 1968. Understood biographically, the category of the event is Badiou's attempt to make sense of the experience of novelty and rupture that accompanied the 'events' of '68. At its simplest, Badiou's general question is: what is novelty? What is creation? How does newness come into the world? Understood politically, the event is that moment of novel, brief, local, communal rupture that breaks with a general situation of social injustice and inequality.

Compelling as I find Badiou's understanding of politics, it is his taste for dictatorship that I find distasteful. Despite the liberal protestations of Hannah Arendt, I agree that the problem of politics is the formation of the general or generic will, of a popular front, what Marx called 'an association of free human beings'. But in my view this should not lead to an apology for dictatorship. Why not embrace the anarchist politics that Badiou so steadfastly rejects, a politics that is also without party and at a distance from the state? My problem with Badiou's politics is that behind his talk of discipline, even if it is no longer party discipline, there is an affectionate and, to my mind, misguided nostalgia for revolutionary violence. Seductive as it is, I find that Badiou's conception of politics suffers from a heroism of the decision, a propaganda of the violent deed in all its deluded romance. It seems to me that in a world governed by the violence of military neo-liberalism, resistance must not take the form of a counter-violence - such is the neo-Leninist logic of al-Qaeda - but should be devoted to the prosecution and cultivation of peace. But peace is not passivity or a state of rest. It is a process, an activity a hugely difficult practice.

For all the apparent optimism and robust affirmativeness of Badiou's conception of philosophy, one might suspect that there is something deeply pessimistic at its heart, which again links Badiou to Rousseau. The formal conditions that define a true politics are so stringent and the examples given are so limited, that it is tempting to conclude that after the Commune and after 1968 any politics of the event has become impossible. But such a conclusion forgets where this essay

started, with Socrates wandering out of the unjust city to dream of another city in speech. Rousseau concludes his *Second Discourse* by showing that that the development of social inequality culminates in a state of war between persons, tribes, nations and civilizations. It is difficult to disagree with such a diagnosis at the present time. In the face of such a state of war, the philosopher's dream of another city will always appear unrealistic and hopelessly utopian. To that extent, the impossibility of Badiou's politics is its greatest strength.

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Slought Foundation Presents

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During the 2007-2008 academic year, students in the RBSL Bergman Foundation Curatorial Seminar at the University of Pennsylvania collaboratively engaged in research spanning disciplines such as literature, visual culture, urbanism, geopolitics, and technology. One residue of these endeavors was this publication series that attempts to construct an archive of the temporal—in particular, the site-specific conversations presented by Slough Foundation.

The classical archive is commonly associated with the preservation of material artifact, while the contemporary archive is increasingly attuned to the dissemination of information, at once material and virtual, dispersed across borders, penetrating the walls of libraries, museums, and homes. With this publication, we hope to further define the archive as a site of perpetual invention and interpretation, itself a form of curatorial practice.

We encourage you to view this DVD publication outside the confines of the university library or cultural institution, and in your own home, community, and place of work, alone or in dialogue with your children and parents, colleagues and friends, neighbors and strangers. In so doing, we hope to transform the page and your screen into a novel archival space—a site of encounter with the ephemeral.

Cover image: Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave* (1991). Commissioned by Artangel; photograph by Martin Jenkinson.
Above: Simon Critchley and Alain Badiou in conversation at Slough Foundation (November 15, 2007).