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Resurrecting (Meta-) Political Theology, or the Abstract Passion of Alain Badiou

Matthew Sharpe

'... all unarmed prophets have failed',
N. Machiavelli, The Discourses.

Introducing Badiou's Saint Paul

Philosophy today is above all paralysed by its relation to history, claims Alain Badiou in his Manifesto for Philosophy. Having long ago abandoned the Platonic postulate of trans-historical Truth, Badiou says:

At bottom, Hegel's famous formula still hangs over [it]: 'The history of the world is also the tribunal of the world'. It can be said that Nietzsche's genealogical method, just as Heidegger's hermeneutic method, have only proposed variants of the Hegelian apparatus on this point.¹

Badiou's avowed intention is 'to tear philosophy away from this genealogical imperative'. Perhaps because of this, one feature of Badiou's theoretical resurrection of Paul in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* is the absence of any reflection on the history of the relation between Christianity and politics. Badiou's 'strange enterprise' in this book is of a different kind to *Manifesto for Philosophy*. His reading of Paul operates by way of what he might term — evoking his language — a two-fold 'subtraction' from Paul's apostolic teachings. Firstly, Badiou invokes a parallel, seemingly generic to our times, between the Roman Empire of Paul's day and 'our contemporary situation'. Hence it is for avowedly political reasons that Badiou looks to Paul. This is a book about where we are now:

for me, Paul is the poet thinker of the event as well as one who practices and states the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure ... [I]f today I wish to retrace in a few pages this connection in Paul it is probably because there is currently a widespread search for a new militant figure ... called upon to succeed the one installed by Lenin and the Bolsheviks at the beginning of this century.

Secondly, as this implies, Badiou's political reading of Paul operates by way of a formalization of Paul's position. In line with the modern Averroism of a Hegel, Badiou claims that Paul's epistles give 'poetic' form to a political thought that can be reformulated in philosophical language:

> [F]or my part, what we shall focus on in Paul's work is a singular connection, which it is formally possible to disjoin from the fable and of which Paul is, strictly speaking, the inventor; the connection that establishes a passage between a proposition concerning the subject and an interrogation concerning the law.

At stake in this two-fold operation is the possibility of (re)constructing a political universalism adequate to today's world.

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Badiou does not deny the connection between the modern political universalisms and Christianity as charged by Nietzsche and others. Badiou accepts it in full:

What is essential for us [in Paul] is how the paradoxical connection between a subject without identity and a law without support provides the foundations for the possibility of a universal teaching within history.  

Badiou’s wager is that Paul’s elevation of pístis (faith), elpis (hope) and agape (‘love’) name the invariant traits of what can be called the militant figure ... the entirely human connection which fascinates me, between the general idea of a rupture, an overturning, and that of a thought-practice that is this rupture’s subjective materiality.

In Economy and Society, Max Weber raised ‘charismatic authority’ as both an ‘ideal type’ of political Herrschaft and in response to his own perplexity as to how political change is possible. In a similar vein, Badiou is interested through Paul in the possibility of a radical new beginning. Badiou argues that when Paul writes ‘for you are not under the law, but under grace [kháris]’, in Romans, 6:24, we should understand kháris as naming how, what he calls the ‘event’ of Christ’s resurrection, was radically unprecedented. Pauline pístis for Badiou names the subject’s declared and ‘charismatic’ faith in this unprecedented event. Hope or elpis is for Badiou that subjective constancy that keeps faith with this fidelity, against the whole world — and one’s finite being as a zoon logon echon (speaking animal), as we will see. Agape, the greatest of these three, names the ‘universal power’ that animates any ‘genuine truth event’ for those who have the ears to hear. It is what enables Christians’ ‘disinterested’ ‘indifference’ to the ethnic and other differences that divide people/s, as well as their ability to address them all.

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In The Ticklish Subject, Slavoj Žižek notes that religion does not form one of the four conditions of philosophy — art, science, love and politics — which Badiou inventories in Being and Event. It is notable that in Badiou’s 2003 Preface to the English translation of Metapolitics, where he reflects on his essays of the previous decade on these ‘truth procedures’, his Saint Paul is not mentioned. In line with Badiou’s own thought, if only in this much, I will argue that Badiou’s ‘strange’ or exceptional enterprise of resurrecting Paul in Saint Paul indicates the truth of his conception of politics. And it is Badiou’s ‘thought’ concerning politics alone that is my concern.

This article draws on resources not generic to the existing reception of Badiou, much of which is devoted to the work of comprehension or proselytization. I will argue that, although Badiou argues in Saint Paul that his philosophy ‘disjoins’ the political truth from Paul’s Christianity, the opposite is closer to the truth. I would suggest that Badiou’s thought is much more Christian than he knows and, so, much less generically political than he believes, or is widely taken as being.

Governing my reading is the observation that Badiou is correct when he asserts the doubly exceptional status of Paul’s apostolic teaching in Saint Paul. The Pauline teaching of resurrection was scandalous from the standpoint of Jewish Law. It was an acosmic ‘folly’ from the standpoint of the Graeco-philosophical thought of the Roman Empire. Unlike the other two great monotheisms, the Christian prophecy of Paul was also singular in its being a prophecy of agape, not Law (nomos). Paul does not descend or ascend from his revelation on the road to Damascus with two tablets. The interpretation of Law was for this reason never to become the highest sophia for the mediaeval Christian philosophers, unlike their Jewish and Islamic contemporaries. The history of Christian thought that Paul initiates is instead largely structured around the attempt to reconcile the conflicting demands of agape and nomos, the city of god and the cities of men. In Martin

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Luther’s terms — to which I will return — a Christian thought of politics is concerned to distinguish the affairs of the Church from those of ‘worldly kingdoms’, rather than generating a science of the latter.\(^{23}\)

Thinking of this intrinsically strained relation between Christian prophecy and the historical world, Hegel put an arresting contention concerning the politics of Christianity in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. For Hegel, Christianity belongs to what Badiouians might call the same ‘sequence’ as ancient Stoicism and scepticism (an issue to which I will return). What initiates this sequence in thought, though, is a withdrawal from the political struggles and miseries of this world. This withdrawal is undertaken by the defeated slaves, who were put to work by the masters who had risked their lives in the desire for recognition. Stoicism and scepticism each enact a devaluation of the body and a correlative valorization of the internal ‘freedom’ or ‘eternity’ of thought.\(^{24}\) Yet, in a famous description of the Christian subject-position which anticipates Badiou’s ‘not [merely particular] ... but [also universal]’ formula to describe the Christian subject,\(^{25}\) Hegel describes early Christianity as characterized by an ‘unhappy consciousness’. This consciousness

knows that it is the dual consciousness of itself as [internally and in Christ] self-liberating, unchangeable, and self-identical, and [as embodied] as self-bewildering and self-perverting, and it is the awareness of this self-contradictory nature of itself. The unhappy consciousness is the consciousness of self as a dual-natured, merely contradictory being.\(^{26}\)

Far from formulating the ‘numericality’ of progressive ‘political sequences’,\(^{27}\) to be blunt, this article’s provocation is that what Badiou’s thinking about politics gives voice to in unprecedented language is nothing more unprecedented or ‘evental’ than the invariant passion of such an unhappy consciousness. If such a


\(^{26}\) Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 126.

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criticism attracts the polemical charge of ‘Phariseeism’ from Badiou or his supporters, this will be the cross the critic, as opposed to the master, will have to bear.

I. Method: Left Behind/the Philosopher’s Rough Ascent

Politics has nothing to do with genius (action is something else). Human affairs are complicated in detail but simple in principle. Social justice can easily be achieved without an ingenious philosophy.

Albert Camus, in Combat, 24 November 1944.

Invoking the title of the best-selling novel by Tim La Haye, we might say that what is most question-worthy for Badiou’s thought about politics is what it can say concerning those ‘left behind’. These are the individuals who do not ‘wager’ on fidelity to the truth event, whether the resurrection of Jesus Christ or whatever else. Feltham and Clemens put this problem nicely. They comment that one could be forgiven at first glance for comparing Badiou’s political thought to a Mormon doctrine.28 As in Mormonism, Badiou’s categories set up a sharp distinction between those who do not hearken to the call of the Event ‘and on the other side ... the new elect ... of faithful followers’.29 Having raised this political consideration, however, Clemens and Feltham immediately leave politics behind. They revert instead to metaphysical concerns: ‘However — and this is crucial — there is no predestination in Badiou’s account’.30 Unless we accept that the thought of a political elect is impossible without the thought of predestination, the question of whether Badiou’s thought does not look towards a charismatic new elite or vanguard (sans predestination) remains.

The problem with Badiou’s politics can be brought into sharper relief by looking to the history of Christian political theology that Saint Fa ul inaugurated. In particular, the singular political theology of Martin Luther reads as strangely contemporary besides Badiou’s work. Luther was a figure who, long before Badiou’s Saint Paul, proposed his own return to Paul and the early Church. Luther, like Badiou, aimed to ‘subtract’ the key address of sola fide and sola

30. Feltham and Clemens, ‘An Introduction to Alain Badiou’s Philosophy’, pp. 7-8
scriptura from the 'gangue' of the later mediaeval Church. Yet Luther’s own political writings in no way sanction an emancipatory this-worldly politics on the strength of his new emphasis on the individual’s direct relation with the higher Truth. When it comes to this-worldly politics, Luther’s prescriptions hearken back to the cardinal doctrines of Augustinianism, and ironically resemble a work contemporary with his own, Machiavelli’s The Prince. Luther promotes the desirability of a sharp (re-) separation between ‘secular authority’ and the ‘kingdom of heaven’:

But perhaps you will say, since Christians do not need the secular sword and the law, why does Paul say to all the Christians, in Romans XIII: ‘Let all souls be subject to power and authority?’ And St Peter says ‘Be subject to all human ordinances’... To such a one we must say: It is indeed true that Christians, as far as they themselves are concerned, are subject to neither law nor sword and need neither, but first take heed and fill the world with real Christians before ruling it in a Christian and evangelical manner. This you will never accomplish, for the world and the masses are and always will be unchristian, although they are all baptised and are nominally Christian ... For these reasons these two kingdoms [of heaven and earth] must be sharply distinguished.

The point is, a ‘subtractive’ Christian appeal to the freedom of thought from secular ‘tyrannies’ does not by itself legislate any political consequences. At the least, it does not prescribe any meaningfully progressive political consequences. Luther’s own reactionary politics, and that of subsequent Christian political theologians up until Carl Schmitt, illustrate something else: they illustrate that thought about politics founded on a transcendent Truth will always also face the need to negotiate the disjunction between this thought and the shared lives of ‘the animals of the City’, as per the famous Platonic eikon of the cave in Republic VII. Notably, this founding eikon of political philosophy is rightly cited

32. Saint Augustine of Hippo, City of God [extracts], in Ebenstein and Ebenstein, pp. 167-90.
34. Luther, ‘Secular Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed’, in Ebenstein and Ebenstein, p. 166.
35. Badiou, Ethics, p. 51.
by Badiou at the very outset of his essay ‘Philosophy and Politics’.36 One thing it indicates is that the philosopher or the prophet who makes the rough ascent out of polis and the doxai of ordinary mortals must also go back down (katabatein) to those left behind, if only to turn their souls around. And herein lies the political rub, or the question about the relationship between politics and philosophy.

Now, to contend that Badiou’s resurrection of philosophy lacks adequate sensitivity to the complexity of the relationship between philosophy per se and politics — or what we might call the ‘politico-philosophical difference’37 — would seem to miss the mark. Badiou is a student of Althusser, who always maintained the ‘relative autonomy’ of different disciplines and their specific theoretical objects.38 Badiou is accordingly careful in Manifesto for Philosophy and elsewhere to ‘delimit’ the scope of his resurrected Platonic philosophy.39 Philosophy, Badiou emphasizes, does not itself produce new truths.40 It is limited in its role to ‘seizing’ and proclaiming what he calls the ‘there are’ of the truths, which, when they arise in rapturous events like the Christian resurrection, arise elsewhere: in les generiques of politics, arts, science and love. Philosophy performs this epistemic operation with what he calls the ‘pincers’ of argument and the ‘fictions’ of rhetoric.41 Philosophy’s task is to think these generic truths in their ‘compossibility’.42 (Apologies to new readers for the inevitable recourse to Badiou’s technical language here. It is necessary to establish what is at issue.)

Badiou provocatively claims that most of what passes for philosophy in today’s world, from Wittgenstein to Derrida, is actually so much sophistry. The later twentieth century, for Badiou, saw intellectuals undertake a guilt-ridden withdrawal from philosophy.43 The principal rationale for this sophistic withdrawal was the overblown notion that ‘philosophy — and philosophy alone’ was ‘accountable for the sublime or repugnant avatars of the political in the [twentieth] century’: namely, the total regimes of

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36. Badiou, Infinite Thought, pp. 69–70.
39. Badiou, Manifesto for Philosophy, p. 27.
42. Badiou, Manifesto for Philosophy, pp. 124, 141–2.
43. Badiou, Manifesto for Philosophy, pp. 116–119.
Left and Right. With and despite this polemical attack, Badiou argues later in *Manifesto for Philosophy* that ‘the essence of terror’, if not ‘every empirical disaster[,] originates in a disaster of thought’. What is this disaster? In a way that evokes Heidegger’s critique of ontotheology or Kant’s dialectic in the first *Critique*, Badiou claims that ‘terror’ flows from ‘a substantialization of Truth’. This is what Badiou calls in his *Ethics* the ‘absolutization of the power of truth’. In such cases, philosophers elide what Badiou calls the liminal ‘void’ of Truth as he sees it. This void is, or should properly always be, ‘the background on which truths are seized’. The result of trying to ‘fill in’ this void with positive ideational content is that:

[a] triple effect of the sacred, of ecstasy and terror thereby corrupts the philosophical operation, and can lead it from the aporetic void that sustains its act to criminal prescriptions.

Interestingly, religion — the subject of Badiou’s *Saint Paul* — is named by Badiou in ‘The Definition of Philosophy’ to formalize this ‘disaster’ of thought. Drawing on these elements in Badiou’s argumentation, Clemens and Feltham write:

The relationship between philosophy and politics [for Badiou] ... is thus one of conditioning or dependence. Philosophy is no longer sovereign. It is as if philosophy had finally heard that cry addressed to it for decades, a cry voiced by so many artists, scientists, activists, and lovers whose activities it has deafly appropriated from on high, the cry ‘SHUT UP AND LISTEN!’

If we are to decide about Badiou’s philosophy and politics, the question is this. What it is that Badiou’s philosophy hears or rather listens for when it turns its newly uncovered ears towards *ta politika*?

Badiou’s neologism for what his philosophy ‘thinks’ from and about politics is ‘metapolitics’. Badiou defines metapolitics in the following way:

By ‘metapolitics’ I mean whatever consequences a philosophy

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is capable of drawing, both in and for itself, from real instances of politics as thought. Metapolitics is opposed to political philosophy, which claims that since no such politics exists, it falls to philosophers to think 'the' political. Each of the terms and phrases here deserves careful exegesis. The first thing to note concerns Jason Barker's attempt to position Badiou's metapolitics as a critique of authoritarian-cum-National Socialist thinker Carl Schmitt. Does not Badiou here set his back against the concept of 'the political' with which Schmitt's name remains associated? In fact, when Badiou attacks the attempt to think 'the political', his target in Metapolitics is Hannah Arendt, whose heterodox republicanism is a very different thing from the bellicose decisionism of a Carl Schmitt. In fact, 'real instances of politics' are for Badiou no more a constant and inalienable feature of human existence than 'the political' (as the 'real possibility of physically killing' the enemy groundlessly decided by an absolute sovereign) is in Schmitt's Concept of the Political. The stake of the latter book was of course to defend the threatened domain of 'the political' from liberal decadence. Real instances of 'politics' are comparatively rare, Badiou agrees with Schmitt. And our liberal-democratic world is increasingly one in which traditional political philosophy's deafness to 'real instances of politics' has been institutionalized to the tawdry tune of neo-liberal managerialism and omnipresent consumerism.

So what, then, are the 'real instances of politics' that Badiou's metapolitics discerns, in contrast to previous political philosophy? Badiou has something very particular in mind. He restricts the name 'politics' to what he calls 'the subjective reality of organised and militant action'. Such actions, to bring things together, presuppose exceptional truth events of the order of the resurrection, which turned Saint Paul around on the road to Damascus from zealotous persecutor of the early Christians to the father of the One True Catholic Church. In fact, Paul's subjective fidelity to the resurrection event is for Badiou a privileged avatar of such a 'real instance of politics', as noted above.

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52. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. xxxix.
53. See J. Parker, 'Introduction' to Badiou, Metapolitics, p. vii. In fact, the paradigm of 'political philosophy' in Metapolitics is the later Arendt, see Badiou, Metapolitics, pp. 10-25.
Badiou's claim in Metapolitics, as in his Being and Event, is that any historical instance of politics 'worthy of the name' involves what he calls four 'multiplicities'. These are, in his language, 'the infinity of situations; the superpower of the state; evental ruptures; [and] militant prescriptions, statements and actions'. This then is a strictly formalistic account of politics. In the final and 'most important' essay of Metapolitics, Badiou goes so far as to provide a metapolitical 'definition' of politics that, remarkably, turns out to be wholly 'numerical' or mathematical in form. 'Believe it or not', as Roffe says, the definition reads as follows:

\[ \sigma, \varepsilon, \pi(\varepsilon), \pi(\pi(\varepsilon)) \rightarrow \]

where:

\[ \sigma = \text{the infinity of the situation} \]

\[ \varepsilon = \text{the infinity of the state} \]

\[ \varepsilon > \sigma = \text{the infinity of the state of the situation ... summoned by repression and alienation, because it supposedly controls all the sets and subsets of the situations} \]

\[ \pi(\varepsilon) = \text{the emergence of a 'universalizable' collective whose prescription 'measures' or delimits the 'errant' infinity of the state} \]

\[ \pi(\pi(\varepsilon)) = \text{the work of the militant collective 'under the conditions of freedom of thought/practice opened up by the fixation of the statist power [i.e. } \pi(\varepsilon)] \]

We will have to return to this definition (especially, as exemplary, the thought: \( \varepsilon > \sigma \)). Yet the singularity of its very form qua mathematical in the history of political ideas should be noted from the start. Because many profound insights have appeared bold to the common sense of their days, it does not follow that everything
that appears bold must be profound. In part criticizing his teacher Plato ('for while both are dear, philosophy requires us to honour truth above our friends'), Aristotle observes in the opening book of his *Nicomachean Ethics* that 'precision is not to be sought for all [subject matters] alike in all discussions'. As Althusser and others also taught, the complexity of the world would seem to demand a methodological pluralism:

For it is the mark of an educated man to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is equally foolhardy to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs.

Aristotle was here anticipating his fundamental distinctions, made in Book VI, between *phronesis* and *sophia, nous, and episteme*. The former, sometimes translated as 'practical wisdom', is a type of deliberation concerning transient things potentially changeable by human action, and the result of its 'practical syllogisms' is practical actions. The latter forms of enquiry (*sophia, nous, episteme*), by contrast, are purely theoretical or contemplative. Their objects are 'first principles' (as in *nous*), and the forms of unchanging or necessary things like mathematical truths or natural laws. These forms of enquiry hence do not issue in, nor can they without qualification guide, any practical actions. All the branches of political science, Aristotle thus stresses — although it is in one way the most 'god-like' knowledge — are and can only be so many reflective specifications of *phronesis*. The reason for this is that they deal with those variable things and institutions capable of being changed by voluntary human action (*prohairesis*), guided by competing visions of human excellence (*arête*). To try to treat *politeia*, however novelly, with the methods one would use to formalize mathematical truth is, for the tradition of political reflection beginning with Aristotle, to have made a category error of the first order. Its substantive price will necessarily be a conceptually violent levelling out of political phenomena per se, if

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Resurrecting (Meta-) Political Theology, or the Abstract Passion

Badiou is keen to stress his distance from the more historically grounded political thought of the tradition that runs from Aristotle via Machiavelli and Montesquieu into historical materialism. This is one object of the central ‘Speculative Disquisition on the Concept of Democracy’ in Metapolitics. So perhaps I can be accused of bringing foreign categories to bear on Badiou’s metapolitical thought. Whether such a defence of Badiou could stand or not, the radical novelty of Badiou’s numerical definition of politics, duly stressed by himself and his followers, at least demands the following: an enquiry as to whether Badiou’s ‘metapolitics’ does not rest on a fundamentally mistaken prioritization of theoretical knowledge over the categories and considerations generic to political praxis. As Badiou himself would direct: there is a philosophical question, one of Truth, to be decided. And in order to decide it, we need to pay attention to the generic realities of politics and the order of truth to which politics corresponds.

Let us consider, then, how in ‘Philosophy and Politics’ Badiou takes up the indisputably political category of ‘justice’, a category particularly central to any progressive leftist politics. For Badiou as for the Greek tradition of political thought, justice involves a notion of equality. Nevertheless, if this much is clear, what Badiou means by equality is controversial. Badiou specifies that equality for him means nothing like the competing visions of distributive or retributive parity that political thought and life have delivered us since Plato:

It is very important to note that ‘equality’ does not refer to anything objective. It is not a question of an equality of status, of income, of function, and even less of the supposedly egalitarian dynamics of contracts or reforms ... Moreover, it has nothing to do with the social. It is a political maxim, a prescription. Political equality is what we declare under fire of the event, here and now, as what is, and not as what should be.

The equality in play for Badiou in his metapolitical conception of justice is ‘strictly subjective, without passing through any objective

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75. Badiou, Metapolitics, pp. 80, 85.
76. Badiou, Infinite Thought, pp. 70, 71.

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mediation'. In other words, justice, as Badiou conceives it, does not concern who gets what share of the social product, how material wealth is to be produced, or how questions of differential merit and competing claims to desert or recognition are to be decided or rewarded. Badiou’s conception of justice instead recalls the specifically ‘declarative’ dimension of Pauline *pistis* (where one must declare one’s faith) in his *Saint Paul*. Badiou’s key example of what he means by justice comes from the French Revolution. It hails from another Saint, Saint Just, and his notion of ‘public consciousness’. Badiou cites Saint Just’s declaration before the French National Convention in April 1794: ‘May you have a public consciousness, for all hearts are equal as to sentiments of good and bad’. The equality in play in Badiou’s justice, it is clear, concerns a certain state of mind, heart or thought about the equality of all. This is why it can ‘here and now’ declare the equality of all, no matter how things actually stand materially or politically. Indeed, as Badiou insists, radically:

The difficulty with most doctrines of justice is that they seek a definition of justice and then they try to find means for its realisation. But justice ... cannot be defined. Equality is not an objective for action, it is an axiom of action.

What this axiom of action might embody or issue in, given that it abstracts from any ‘objective mediation’, including the consideration of political ends to be pursued on the basis of our equality, is difficult to define indeed. It seems we are being presented here with an abstraction from material conditions and political considerations that makes Kant’s formalistic moral theory seem dourly materialistic. But could we not again be moving too quickly, and missing Badiou’s point? Have we not been told, after all, that Badiou’s metapolitics intends exactly to rescue the specificity of real instances of politics from what, in a standard way, passes for political action and the methodological imperialism of a philosophical heritage that has for too long claimed to speak politics’ truths from on high?

To answer, let us ask directly: from what *perspective* does Badiou declare these challenges to our inherited understandings of justice?

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and equality? And, more precisely, is this perspective truly a perspective that would enable Badiou (and all of us) to grasp politics as a generique of human experience, without subordinating it to our own alien agendas?

In response to these questions, Badiou is characteristically clear and distinct. Badiou’s ‘Speculative Disquisition on Democracy’ sets itself the unusual, but surely philosophical, task of considering whether ‘democracy’ is or is not a category ‘worthy’ of ‘speculation’. To be direct: this is not a question many militants, or any other political agents, can be expected to have reflected upon for themselves. In Metapolitics Badiou talks about his aim in terms of the difficult, but again surely inescapably philosophical, end of ‘seizing the intellectuality of a politics’, despite the times. ‘Politics and Philosophy’ ends by defining ‘justice’ as ‘the name by which philosophy designates the possible truth of a political procedure’. The issue of the relation of politics to philosophy, Badiou tells us, is whether any really-existing political orientations happen to be ‘worthy of submission to philosophy under the category of “justice”’ or ‘are worth our trying to seize the thought specific to them via the resources of the philosophic apparatus’. Once more we can suspect that the militants Badiouians praise might look at this concern of their master and blink. And what is it that Badiou promises us, should we, with him, ‘submit [“justice”] to the test of singular statements … [which] bear forth and inscribe the egalitarian axiom in action’? As it turns out, nothing more generically ‘of the polis’ than the following:

it is by means of such a figure that philosophy assures, via its own names, the inscription of what our time is capable of in eternity.

To be ironic, one can picture, reading Badiou’s account of the relationship between philosophy and politics, a bunch of philosophers in a panoptical Bibliothèque Nationale eagerly monitoring ‘the animals of the city’, hoping to espy something worthy of their thought. There is a serious point behind the jest,

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82. In a way Barker describes as ‘somewhat cavalier’ in J. Barker, ‘Introduction’ to Badiou, Metapolitics. This is what we shall have to see.
83. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 60.
84. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 45.
85. Badiou, Infinite Thought, p. 70, emphasis added.
86. Badiou, Infinite Thought, pp. 71, 74.
87. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 75, emphasis added.
though. It is that, protestations aside, the real instances of politics that Badiou’s philosophy would humbly ‘hear’ turn out to be only those that meet Badiou’s philosophically-shaped concern for what he calls truth events. They have nothing to do with the categories and concerns that shape historical agents’ own generically political concerns. Badiou’s ‘rough ascent’ from doxa towards the philosophical Truth is also a radical ‘cut’ from historical political experience. Indeed, as we will see, the radicality of this break both recalls and finally trumps Hobbes’ embrace of Gassendi’s atomist physics to justify his authoritarian politics in Leviathan.

So we now have to turn directly to the issue that is thus raised: namely, what happens to all of those other seemingly political actions and agents who are left behind by this metapolitical/philosophical reduction of the political?

II. Substance: The Left Behind/’Thought’ and Historical Terror

Should anyone become the ruler, either of a city or of a state ... if he has no sure footing in it ... the best thing he can do in order to retain such a principality ... is to organise everything in that state afresh ... build new cities, ... destroy those already existing, and ... move the inhabitants from one place to another far distant from it, to leave nothing in the province intact, and nothing in it, neither rank, nor institution, nor form of government, nor wealth, except it be held by such as recognise that it comes from you.


The Stoics were at the beginning of the sequence of thought that Hegel tells us led to the unhappy consciousness of the early Christians. Withdrawing from the Imperial Roman times in which they were fated to live, the Stoics assigned the unique dignity of men, a kind of ‘infinitude’, to the unbound, internal freedom to think. As Hegel writes, with Stoicism:

[W]e are in the presence of self-consciousness in a new shape, a consciousness which, as the infinitude of consciousness or as its own pure movement, is aware of itself as essential being, a being which thinks or is a free self-consciousness ... In thinking, I am free, because I am not in...
an other, but remain simply and solely in communion with myself. ... 88

In a surprisingly similar way, Badiou argues in ‘Philosophy and Politics’ that the one common feature of all the political events worthy of being ‘seized’ by philosophy in the way discussed ‘is that from the people they engage, these orientations require nothing but their strict generic humanity’. 89 The form of this thought at least is classically humanistic. More rupturous is that Badiou specifies that what is generically human is the capacity to ‘think’. Here is Badiou: ‘equality means that a political actor is represented under the sole sign of his or her specifically human capacity ... [and] the capacity which is specifically human is that of thought’. 90 Once again, Badiou’s resurrection of philosophy seems to sail very close to a recasting of politics in its own elevated image. Badiou sees nothing strange or problematic in terming politics itself a ‘thought’, or even a ‘truth procedure’. As we saw above, its entire worth for him comes from how politics happens to be one condition of philosophy, alongside falling in love, the production of great art, and scientific discoveries (see later). 91 In what amounts to a very radical rethinking of the Marxist category of praxis indeed, as Feltham and Clemens comment, 92 ‘Politics as Thought’ is for these reasons the title of Badiou’s essay in Metapolitics about a man whose example he tells us ‘sustains’ his own intervention, Lazarus 93:

Politics is a thought. This statement excludes all recourse to the theory/praxis pairing. There is certainly a ‘doing’ of politics, but it is immediately the pure and simple experience of a thought, its localisation. Doing politics cannot be distinguished from thinking politics. 94

Well may Badiou register in ‘Philosophy and Politics’ how, for Plato, ‘philosophy knows that it is incapable of realising in the world the truths it testifies to’ because of the ‘irreducible complexity of political circumstances’. 95 Every political philosopher

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88. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 120.
89. Badiou, Infinite Thought, p. 70.
93. cf. Badiou, Metapolitics, pp. 52, 128.
94. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 46, emphasis added.
95. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 96; cf. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 87; Badiou, Manifesto for Philosophy, pp. 131–35.
from Plato onwards has recognised that 'science itself began — with mathematics — with the radical renunciation of every principle of authority', and so is an abstraction from the complexities of political life.\textsuperscript{96} Many have faced persecution on exactly these grounds. With this said, it seems very much as though Badiou has today become the first philosopher to suggest that the founding theoretical renunciation of the institutions and power relations constitutive of political life could operate as the paradigm for 'real' political action itself. This, in any event, is the singular possibility we have to investigate now.

Badiou elaborates the 'thought' he means in his \textit{Ethics}. In Badiou's defence, the way 'thought' is framed there is as different in its content from the 'free thought' of the historical Stoics as it is from the deliberative reasoning of political philosophy.\textsuperscript{97} Here Badiou's thought is much closer to Saint Paul, if we must invoke the ancients to discuss something truly unheard-of. 'Thought', Badiou says, names 'that by which the path of a truth seizes and traverses the human animal ... [it is] the specific mode by which a human animal is traversed and overcome by a truth'.\textsuperscript{98} Again, the 'truth' here pertains to radical, rapturous events: whether in science, love or art. Of course, Badiou has to concede, there is more involved in theoretical inquiries and 'thought' than the type of epistemic break involved — to use one of Badiou's key examples — in Paul Cohen's discovery of 'the central paradox of the theory of the multiple ... a discernible concept [of] what is an indiscernible multiplicity'.\textsuperscript{99} Nevertheless, as per his definition of 'justice' taken from Saint Just in \textit{Metapolitics}, Badiou does take any political 'truth procedure' worthy of philosophical attention to be, primarily, 'axiomatic':

There is no political orientation linked to truth which does not possess an affirmation — an affirmation which has neither a guarantee nor a proof — of a universal capacity for political truth. Here thought cannot use the scholastic
method of definitions. It must use a method which proceeds via a comprehension of axioms. 100

What Badiou is hypostasizing here is a metaphilosophical insight already arguably grasped by the Greeks. The ‘first principles’ of a system of deductive thought can ultimately not be demonstrated within the system they precondition.101 That would be like someone jumping over their own shadow. These axioms must instead be posited by an axiomatic decision in order that enquiry can proceed. Thinking again of what Badiou has to say about politics, it would seem, then, that Badiou’s novel wager would be to assert that any ‘veritable political sequence’102 is most akin, of all the diverse species of human activity, to the activity of positing such groundless first principles in theoretical enquiry. Real instances of politics for Badiou will always centrally involve the positing by agents of axioms, which, like the first moment when people fall in love, ‘punch a hole’ [trouée] in the situation that preceded the event.103 And this is why it becomes meaningful for Badiou to call politics a ‘truth procedure’, over the heads of political agents and the categories (good, evil, just, unjust ...) they use to conceptualize their political actions. The ‘ethics of truth’ that such a ‘truth procedure’ in each case involves, Badiou continues, always reduces to but one question. The Pauline echoes of this question also are clear:

[H]ow will I, as someone, continue to exceed my own being? How will I link the things I know, in a consistent fashion, via the effects of being seized by the not-known?

One might also put it like this: how will I continue to think? That is, to maintain in the singular time of my multiple-being, and with the sole material resources of this being, the Immortal that a truth brings into being through me in the composition of a subject ...104

So now we are in a position to pose adequately the political question with which I opened this essay: namely, what happens to those individuals ‘left behind’ by the truth event? In terms of the
previous quotation, for so long as such ‘Immortal’ subjects (whether single individuals or militant collectives) walk amongst us, how will these evental subjects think about and act towards others? It is true, as Badiou stipulates, that ‘the egalitarian axiom’ — that all are equal qua thinking animals — is ‘inherent in a veritable political sequence’. Yet we saw in Part I that this egalitarian axiom does not imply any concrete distributive ideal, and is equally silent concerning the means to attain any said ideals. So, will the action of the evental subject, whether one individual or an elect vanguard be bound by any calculable principles at all towards those left behind? Or are we being asked, in the name of philosophical truth, to simply accept an ‘elective indiscernibilty’ about the actions of post-evental Badiouian subjects? Is this just one less palatable implication of what Badiou means by ‘Politics Unbound’ in Metapolitics that real men or thinkers should fearlessly embrace?

To broach this question, we should raise again in more detail the comparison between Badiou’s meta-political thought and the political theology of Martin Luther. As we saw earlier, Luther conceived the ‘internal’ capacity for conscience, if not ‘thought’, afforded Christians as a wholly trans- or apolitical thing. What, then, was the other, this-worldly side of this thought so central to the burgeoning of modern individualism? As Nietzsche noted, God’s gift of conscience to each man equally in no way prevented Luther from speaking of ‘this world’ at large and the majority of its people with a remarkably venomous tongue. For Luther, the mortal animals who live in the kingdoms of this world — and more particularly the peasants — are not much more elevated than a menagerie:

It is out of the question that there should be a common Christian government over the whole world, nay even one land or company of people, since the wicked always outnumber the good. Hence a man who would venture to govern an entire country or the world with the Gospel would be like a shepherd who should place in one fold wolves, lions, eagles and sheep together and let them freely mingle with one another and say, Help yourselves, and be good and peaceful among yourselves; the fold is open, there is plenty

105. Badiou, Infinite Thought, p. 72.
of food; have no fear of dogs and clubs. The sheep, forsooth, would keep the peace and would allow themselves to be fed and governed, but they would not live long; nor would any beast keep from molesting one another.107

Now, the point here concerns how Badiou talks about that vast majority of events, processes and actions that the rest of the world describe as 'political'. For when he does, Badiou's language is scarcely less evangelical than Luther’s. As Stavrakakis comments, Badiou’s rhetoric is typically ‘heroic, excessive, even quasi-religious’.108 Badiou denounces as ‘Thermidoreans’,109 or even as ‘philosophical Pharisees’,110 thinkers like Hannah Arendt who claim that the business of forming doxa about competing human goods is essential to politics (versus philosophy, love, art or science). Indeed, Badiou describes the vast majority, if not all, the processes that take place within the cities of the world as ‘repulsive’ or explicitly ‘subhuman’111:

The vast majority of empirical political orientations have nothing to do with truth. We know this. They organise a repulsive mixture of power and opinions. The subjectivity that animates them is that of the tribe and the lobby, of electoral nihilism and the blind confrontation of communities. Philosophy has nothing to say about such politics, for philosophy thinks thought alone, whereas these orientations present themselves explicitly as unthinking, or as non-thought.112

In other words, when it comes to those of us mortal animals ‘left behind’, Badiou rehearses nearly literally what Pierre-André Taguieff has identified as the grundmotif of the reactionary anti-modernism113 running from de Maistre and Nietzsche (as we might add) to the world’s Murdoch Press today. Echoing Carl Schmitt again, Badiou can, for instance, only see in modern liberalism’s

110. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 50.
112. Badiou, Infinite Thought, p. 79; Badiou, Ethics, p. 31.
sanctification of 'freedom of opinion' and the promotion of
democratic will-formation in an open public sphere:

special rights for falsity and for lying ... The laziness of those
who are sheltered from every norm and see their errors or
their lies protected by right.

It is indeed clear that, apart from those who believe that
saloon bar philosophy or conversations between friends
constitute 'the very essence of political life', debate is political
only to the extent that it crystallises in a decision ... 114

In this decisionistic light, it might seem little wonder that in
'Speculative Disquisition on Democracy' Badiou argues that the
founding question of political philosophy — what makes for a
good state — is actually beneath the dignity of his metapolitics. 115
'The State does not think', Badiou thinks. 116 Instead, it is given over
to the all-too-mundane tasks of fulfilling the functions associated
with material production, social reproduction and crafting a
working consensus of opinions. 117 And what has this to do with
philosophy? The historical state is to be aligned with 'the subjective
orientation of interest' of subevental human animals. 118

Eschewing the roots of this term in the Latin inter-est, moreover, Badiou thinks
of 'interest' in a pessimistic, almost neo-liberal manner: as 'what
Spinoza calls “perseverance in being” ... the conservation of self' as
a suffering animal. 119 Indeed, regarding the modern state's social
democratic provision of welfare and its 'ethics committees', 120
Badiou concurs with today's neo-liberal and reactionary choruses
that the state promotes an insipid, 'negative and victimary
definition of man': 121:

[T]he status of victim, of suffering beast, of emaciated, dying
body, [which] equates man with the animal substructure ... reduces him to the level of living organism pure and simple
... To be sure, humanity is an animal species. It is mortal and

114. Badiou, Metapolitics, pp. 15, 14–16; Badiou, Ethics, pp. 31–4; cf. I. Devitsch, ‘Democracy’s


116. Badiou, Metapolitics, p. 82, emphasis added.

117. Badiou, Infinite Thought, p. 73.

118. Badiou, Infinite Thought, p. 70.

119. Badiou, Ethics, p. 46.

120. Badiou, Ethics, p. 15.

121. Badiou, Ethics, p. 16.
predatory. But neither of these attributes can distinguish humanity within the world of the living ... this 'living being' is contemptible, and he will indeed be held in contempt ...\textsuperscript{122}

The measure of Badiou's pessimistic, unworldly estimation of the state per se, however, can only be fully measured by returning to the mathematical definition of the 'numericality of political sequences' introduced in Part I above. In this formalization, the 'thought' $\varepsilon > \sigma$ was defined by Badiou in these terms: 'the infinity of the state of the situation ... summoned by repression and alienation, because it supposedly controls all the sets and subsets of the situations'.\textsuperscript{123} As promised, it is now time to think through what this 'thought' involves.

At the outset of modern political thought, Hobbes sought, by recourse to the Biblical symbol of the leviathan — who 'none is so fierce that dare stir him up'\textsuperscript{124} — to establish the absolute sovereign power of early modern monarchies. With the exception of Carl Schmitt, with whom he is often compared, Hobbes presents the most radical, authoritarian estimation of the power of the modern state, or prescription concerning this. By recourse to his set theory, however, what does Badiou do? He effectively posits a political state of infinitely more fearsome capacity than Hobbes' hopes or fears drew him to envisage. Badiou's 'thought' about the 'infinite' repressive power of the state turns upon a wholesale, and \textit{prima facie} absurd equation of the political state with the 'state' in set theory. We know this because he tells us that the thought $\varepsilon > \sigma$ is shaped by the Zermelo-Fraenkel power-set axiom in mathematical set theory.\textsuperscript{125} In that theoretical field, this axiom 'counts' all the possible subsets of any mathematical 'situation'. It in this way lists all the possible relations between the constituent elements.\textsuperscript{126} If we follow Badiou in equating all the empirical interchanges between

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Badiou, \textit{Ethics}, p. 12, emphasis added.
\item Badiou, \textit{Metapoliticals}, p. 147.
\item Badiou, \textit{Metapoliticals}, pp. 144, 146–7. Roffe writes: 'This transition is effected by Badiou, in \textit{L’Etre et l’Eventement} in the following way, at the very point he [Badiou] comes to name this metastructuring of the situation: “From herein after, due to a metaphorical affinity with politics that will be explained in \textit{Meditation 8}, I will term state of the situation that by means of which the structure of a situation — of any structured presentation whatsoever — is counted as one...” There are two interesting things about this little sentence here, and more besides. In fact, it is the sentence that introduces the entire relation between ontology and politics in Badiou’s thought...'; Roffe, 'Post- or Pre-Critical? On the Absence of the Concept of Capitalism in Alain Badiou’s \textit{Metapoliticals}', p. 4.
\item Badiou, \textit{Metapoliticals}, p. 147.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
individuals within a ‘state’ with the possible subsets within a mathematical situation, we can, with Badiou, accordingly ‘mathematically demonstrate’, without recourse to politics or history at all:

that this excess [in the power of the state over individuals] is not measurable. There is no answer to the question about how much the power of the State exceeds the individual, or [this ‘or’ condensing the entire methodological issue here — MS] how much the power of representation exceeds that of simple presentation. The excess is errant. The simplest experience of the relation to the State shows that one relates to it without ever being able to attain a measure of its power.

If we abstract for a moment from the veneer of profundity carried in the ancient dream of being able to mathematize everything — or the chic of the latest ‘master thinker’ we seem to need from the continent — this truly is an astonishingly oversimplified, if not absurd, conception of ‘really-existing’ politics. Such an estimation of the power of the state is also, we might note, very good news indeed for the forces of reaction, and the powers that be, who might have had good historical reasons to think their power an altogether more qualified, a posteriori thing.

One thing we can say with certainty about Badiou’s thought on politics is that the link between *theoria* and *praxis*, which Marxian political theory had sought to forge by promoting engaged, immanent critique of sociopolitical formations, is left far behind. If the power of the state is postulated as infinite, it follows directly that there is no immanent space, process or potentials within the world as it is that the Left might look to with a view to progressively transforming the existing order. Unsurprisingly then, we find that Badiou’s examples of ‘veritable political sequences’ are wholly of the order of violent, abortive or openly reactionary ruptures against the world as it is:

In the order of the political, the event is concentrated in the historical sequence which stretches from about 1965 to 1980, and which has seen the succession of what Sylvain Lazarus calls ‘obscure events’; that is: obscure from the point of view of politics. They include: May 68 and its aftermath, the *Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Iranian revolution*, the working class and national movement in Poland (‘Solidarity’).

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Now, given that this list of examples is capacious enough to include the fundamentalist 'subject' invoked by Ayatollah Khomeini's Islamism and Mao's cultural revolution, it is in truth difficult to see why Badiou's thought tends to be received as progressive at all. It is avant gardist, to be sure. But the relationship between aesthetic or conceptual radicality and political radicality is complicated. The two 'radicalities' here are in fact nearly as unrelated as the 'states' in set theory and the modern state apparatuses that evolved in Europe from the sixteenth century. More than this, it is difficult to see how we can fail to register the deep imbrication of his 'politics as thought' with violence.

It is a fallacy to think that because many progressive actions have involved the violent overthrow of unjust social arrangements, that political violence per se is progressive. Yet Badiou's set-theoretical language of 'seizing' or 'forcing' the elements of a situation to attest to the interpelling event, when we descend from the math, seems hardly to allow for the widest variety of political applications. It is even more problematic when it is coupled with Badiou's critique of discursive democratic will-formation that I have recounted. Badiou himself pulls no punches when he tries to separate his critique of the event from the Nazis' fidelity to their axiomatic naming of the 'Jews' as the enemy. The Carl Schmitt of The Concept of the Political distinguished 'the political' from the tawdry liberal realities of the later 1920s by recourse to the decided opposition of friends versus enemies. So too Badiou in The Ethics avows in directly Schmittian terms that:

Even in this respect [viz. naming an enemy], we have to recognise that this process mimics an absolute truth process. Every fidelity to an event names the adversaries of its perseverance. Contrary to consensual ethics, which tries to avoid divisions, the ethic of truths is always militant, combative. For the concrete manifestation of its heterogeneity to opinions and established knowledges is the struggle against all sorts of efforts of interruption, at corruption, at the return to the immediate interests of the human animal, at the humiliation and repression of the Immortal who arises as Subject. The ethic of truths presumes recognition of these efforts, and thus the singular operation of naming enemies.


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This, then, would seem to be the measure of how Badiouian vanguards can be expected to politically engage with others who insist that political life is not exhausted by, but neither can it wholly transcend, our condition as finite discursive human animals. Given the designation of politics as axiomatic ‘thought’ in *Metapolitics*, Badiou’s specification of a defensible democracy, taken in a ‘philosophical sense’ is hardly less troubling. Democracy, viewed metapolitically, says Badiou, is a political regime in which ‘every non-egalitarian statement concerning the situation’ is not simply prohibited, but *impossible*. The thought here, such as it is, is to again identify ‘the state’ with ‘repression’ or prohibition in a way that Foucault or Zizek, to cite only two contemporaries, have shown to be deeply questionable: since their insight has been the extent to which power produces, as well as says ‘no’. As to what Badiou’s ‘thought’ here might mean if it were ever to inform historical, political action, we can agree with Badiou that it will involve a ‘different thing altogether’ than what modern thought has tended to associate with political democracy.

Terror, Badiou argues in his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, is the ‘illegal’ fidelity to a substantialization of Truth. In his *Ethics*, by contrast, Badiou stresses that when he talks of ‘terror’ he does not mean ‘the political concept of Terror, linked (in a universalizable couple) to the concept of Virtue by the Immortals of the Jacobin Committee of Public Safety’. Hegel, as we might recall here, agrees that the historical Terror of the Jacobins was not a betrayal by the Jacobins of the Truth for which they stood. The Terror, Hegel argued, followed from the Jacobin’s attempt to give political form to a still deeply alienated, Rousseauian conception of thought, freedom and the human will. Hegel’s thinking about this in *Philosophy of Right* section 5 hence becomes remarkable as we try to come to terms with Badiou’s thought about politics, and Badiou’s evident admiration for the short-lived Immortals history knows as the Jacobins:

If the will determines itself ... [as] this absolute possibility of abstracting from every determination in which I find myself, or which I have posited in myself, the flight from every content as a limitation ... this is the freedom of the void,

which is raised to the status of an actual shape and passion. If it remains purely theoretical, it becomes in the religious realm the Hindu fanaticism of pure contemplation, but if it turns to actuality, it becomes in the realm of both politics and religion the fanaticism of destruction, demolishing the whole existing social order, eliminating all individuals regarded as suspect by a given order, and annihilating any organisation which attempts to rise up anew ... It may well believe that it wills some positive condition, for instance the condition of universal equality or of universal religious life, but it does not in fact will the positive actuality of this condition, for this at once gives rise to some kind of order, a particularisation both of institutions and of individuals, but it is precisely through the annihilation of particularity and of objective determination that the self-consciousness of this negative freedom arises ... [During] the reign of Terror in the French Revolution ... all differences of talents and authority were cancelled out ... For fanaticism wills only what is abstract, not what is articulated, so that whatever differences emerge, it finds them incompatible with its own indeterminacy, and cancels them out ... all institutions are incompatible with the abstract self-consciousness of equality.135

If the Left is not to repeat itself, or those moments of its history that today provide such ammunition for the 'there is no alternative' chorus from the Right, Badiou cannot save us. We need to think again.

Conclusion, or Think Again

The world is too wicked, and does not deserve to have wise and pious princes. Frogs need storks ...

Martin Luther, 'Secular Authority: The Extent to Which It should be Obeyed'.

Before we conclude, it is worth emphasizing the nature of this critique of Badiou, which is an immanent critique. As The LA Times has remarked, Badiou's gift to the contemporary intellectual conjuncture is to have made it possible to talk again of philosophy, and of truth, the good and justice, without which critical thought

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must indeed fall dead. Whether the merit of this cause legislates all of Badiou's conclusions, any more than it would justify a wholesale adoption of Jurgen Habermas or Leo Strauss, is what is in question. It is only the absence of an adequate reflection on the relation of this philosophy to politics that has been in question in this article, and — as the corollary of this — an adequately nuanced philosophy of politics itself.

To restate some old principles: immanent critique in the legacy of historical marxism set itself to overcome the divisions that bifurcated earlier modern thought in general. Drawing on Hegel, Kantian philosophy, as read for instance by Lukacs or Horkheimer, is the most powerful formalization of a set of unresolvable divisions between is and ought, fact and value, universal and particular, theoretical understanding and practical reason. The means immanent critique used to do this was an historically grounded social theory that aimed to uncover crisis potentials within the situation that was being critiqued. Such critical theory sought to negotiate the intrinsic tension between theoria and praxis — the descent of the philosopher back into the polis — by means of whom it addressed. It addressed those subjects within societies most historically capable of — because of their functional importance — and most directly interested in — because of their material suffering — progressive political change.

In Max Horkheimer's early essays, he conducted a series of detailed studies of the 'freedom movements' of the early modern period, from Savaranola and Cola to the Jacobins. Horkheimer argues that historical study of these movements shows that Max Weber's 'stress on the rationalistic trait of the [modern] bourgeois mind' is not false. But it is one-sided. 'Irrationalism is from the start no less associated with its history.' From Luther and Machiavelli onwards, Horkheimer documents, the progressive axioms of the great liberators of the modern subject have always been coupled with expressions of a darker nature — particularly sermons and diatribes denouncing the brutal 'egoism' of human nature. Here, for one example again, is Martin Luther, referring to Paul in order
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to make himself clear about what is to be done with those left behind by the Christian experience:

[What] is needed in the world is a strict, hard, worldly power to force and compel the wicked not to take, nor rob, and to return what they borrow, although a Christian should neither demand it back nor hope to get it back ... Therefore, one must keep the streets clean, create peace and enforce law in the country, and hack away with the sword at violators, as St Paul teaches at Romans 13:4 ... No one must believe that the world can be ruled without bloodshed; the secular sword should and must be red and bloodthirsty ... 141

What should we make of this strange, double-sidedness of modern thought? Here is Horkheimer’s assessment:

The reformation, with its morally depressing anti-human pathos, its hatred for the earthworm’s vanity, its dark doctrine of predestination, is not so much the opponent of bourgeois humanism as its other, its misanthropic side. It is humanism for the masses, while humanism itself is the reformation for the wealthy.142

And how does he, as a critical Marxian, set out to explain this double-sidedness? Without eschewing the ‘problem of truth’,143 and carrying out his own sustained criticism of the pragmatists and historicists of his day, Horkheimer asks about the sociopolitical conditions that promote this unhappy, divided modern consciousness. His ‘Materialism and Morality’ is for this reason one of the most devastating criticisms of Kant’s practical philosophy ever written. In it, the young Horkheimer argues that the ‘insurmountable, properly ontological’ division of the modern subject, that Badiou’s Ethics still replicates,144 philosophically reflects the sociopolitical bifurcations intrinsic to what is today called ‘deregulated’ capitalism. In such an atomized society, bound only by the price mechanism or ‘invisible hand’:

The social whole lives through the unleashing of the possessive instincts of all individuals. The whole is maintained

144. Badiou, Ethics, p. 54.

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insofar as the individuals concern themselves with profit and the conservation and multiplication of their own property ... Due to the lack of rational organisation of the social whole which his labour benefits, [the individual] cannot recognise himself in his true connection to it and knows himself only as an individual whom the whole affects somewhat, without it ever becoming clear how much and in what manner his egoistic activity actually affects. The whole thus appears as an admonition and demand which troubles precisely the progressive individuals at their labour, both in the call of conscience and in moral deliberation. 145

In these alienating sociopolitical conditions, that is, Horkheimer argues that we should expect that the moral ideals that give form to the demand of the social whole on the individual will become increasingly 'overstrained'. In their increasingly abstract and elevated light, the 'egoism' that individuals are economically stimulated to indulge limitlessly can only appear to them as less and less ethically redeemable. The sad result of this bitter dialectic is, then, the systemic cultivation of what Horkheimer calls:

a secret contempt for one's own concrete existence and ... hatred for the happiness of others, ... a nihilism which has expressed itself again and again in the modern age as the practical destruction of everything joyful and happy, as barbarity and destruction. 146

Is Horkheimer, by questioning the redeemability of calls to self-overcoming as radical or abstract as Kant's categorical imperative, really sponsoring what Badiou might call a Thermidorean reconciliation to 'capital-parliamentarianism'? 147 Of course he is not. Indeed, what critical theory should begin by setting itself against is all such one-sided denunciations. 148 What is suggested by the young Horkheimer's analysis of the philosophical discourse of modernity — cited here purely as an example of immanent historical critique — is this. We should surely think about what we are leaving behind — from Marx's species-being to its roots in Aristotle's eudaimonism — if we accept Badiou's position that 'every

145. M. Horkheimer, 'Materialism and Morality', in Between Philosophy and Social Theory: Selected Early Writings, pp. 19, 20.
147. Badiou, Metapolitics, pp. 17, 84, 111
definition of Man based on happiness is nihilist.\footnote{Badiou, \textit{Ethics}, p. 57.} We should also surely ask ourselves whether our ‘thought’ is giving voice to anything more noble than the atomization of later capitalist subjectivity if we accept Badiou’s neo-Lutheran thought that the vast majority of people alive today, or at any time, are ‘contemptible, and \textit{they will indeed be held in contempt}.\footnote{Badiou, \textit{Ethics}, p. 12.}

Let us conclude by allowing Badiou again to speak for himself. In his \textit{Manifesto for Philosophy}, he far from denounces neo-liberal capitalism outright. Capital is to be ‘saluted’, he says. The reason is not that it melts old certainties into air, at the same time forming new solidarities and making possible unprecedented material wealth. The reason is that it enacts what he calls a ‘destitution’ of the social bond. In typical philosophical clip, he adds that the fact that this destitution ‘operates through the most utter barbarity cannot disguise its strictly ontological virtue’.\footnote{Badiou, \textit{Manifesto for Philosophy}, p. 57; cf. J. Barker, ‘Introduction’ to Badiou, \textit{Metapolitics}, pp. xxiii–xiv.} Divesting ‘communism’ from any form of historical struggle or the labour movement, Badiou hence prophesies in ‘Politics Unbound’ that:

\begin{quote}
The communists embody the unbound multiplicity of consciousness, its anticipatory aspect, and therefore the precariousness of the bond [between individuals] rather than its firmness. It is not for nothing that the maxim of the proletarian is to have nothing to lose but their chains, and to have the world to win. \textit{It is the bond that we must terminate}...\footnote{Badiou, \textit{Metapolitics}, pp. 74–5, emphasis added.}
\end{quote}

More humbly, I submit the thought that, if the ‘polyvalent man’ whom Badiou praises here as the ‘emblem’ of communism is to flourish, it is difficult to think of a political thought that could be more untrue.