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A Response to
Jonathon Collerson

Matthew Sharpe

Badiou’s teacher Plato argued that philosophy is a business of eros (love and desire).\(^1\) In the modern orbit, Freud has told us that love is above all a business of identification. Plato’s *Symposium* agrees that philosophy begins with identification with, and love for, certain beautiful individuals. It then ascends towards the love of the beauty that is in many people towards the idea of beauty itself, via the beauty that exists in laws, literature and philosophy. Yet often enough, as the drunken Alkibiades shows in the *Symposium*, love does not make it beyond identification with beloved figures.

This is one concern that animated my article, ‘Resurrecting (Meta-)Political Theology’. Particularly in the antipodes, fuelled by remnants of a distinct cultural cringe, a culture of mindlessly identifying with the latest figures from the continent persists. Philosophy and ‘theory’ in these cases in truth never transcends philology: deciphering the often cryptic formulations of one or other master. Often, too, on the model of the artistic (as against the political) avant-garde, this philological act stands as substitute for any political engagement. I confess to wanting to be a Socrates to this Alkibiadean tendency, for Socrates famously spurned the great Athenian general and tyrant in the name of philosophy.

Collerson’s article is not of the purely philological type. It goes to the heart of the philosophical and political issues that I believe my article raises. Collerson’s defence of Badiou is informed by his

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\(^1\) I would like to thank Jonathan Collerson for his excellent, spirited defence of Badiou against my theoretical and political attack upon Badiou’s work in *Arena Journal*, no. 29/30.

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much wider knowledge of the history of leftist critical thought, from Callinicos to Adorno back to Hegel, all of whom are duly cited.

My article's best feature, as far as Collerson is concerned, is that it raises the topic that has long concerned Badiou, that of negation. This philosophical consideration is informed by Badiou's acute sense of the political malaise of the post-1968 Left: the collapse of parliamentary social democracy into the timidity of the neo-liberal Third Way, and the wider collapse of radical politics into the plurality of cultural struggles concerning particular lifestyle choices and their recognition.

My article's worst feature is that I do not understand philosophy as Badiou conceives it. Hence, I miss how Badiou eludes my criticisms: pre-eminently that he embodies in new language the ancient, frustrated position of a beautiful soul, whose only politics can be one of outraged fanaticism.

Collerson stresses that if we take into account Badiou's notion of subtraction, we can see that I have misrepresented his position. As he notes, my argument denies that Badiou can mediate between philosophy and politics. In Marxian terms, this means that he does not provide the means for any determinate negation of the existing order — just an abstract explosion of an Event, which, I suggest, not very subtly, seems uncomfortably close to the premillenarian Christian fundamentalist's rapture in its celebrated 'indiscernability' from within today's world, and its appeal to a new, 'infinite' subject.

Badiou's notion of subtraction is, however, more constructive than I give it credit for. It is like Schoenberg's refiguring of musical composition: not just an abstract negation of old forms (which would be amusical sound), but composition according to a new set of forms. 'This renders Sharpe's claim that "Badiou is interested ... in a radical new beginning" implausible.'

Collerson's key point is to restate this defence of Badiou in Badiou's own language, borrowed from mathematics. Since I am not qualified in that discipline, let me defer to Collerson fully before I make my response:

The unhappy consciousness thinks there is only the stark alternation of P and A, 'the idea that the world knows only the necessary rightist backlash and the powerless suicidal leftism'. What the formula $A = (AAp)$ is decomposed to here,

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is Ap(Ap), where there is nothing but the regime of places, and A(A), where the force is entirely abstract.

However, Badiou replaces this unhappy oppositional way of thinking with ‘dialectical scission’:

'There is A, and there is Ap (read: “A as such” and “A in an other place,” the place distributed by the space of placement, or P),’ Badiou says. ‘We thus have to posit a constitutive scission: A = (AAP).’ Any force, A, is split between itself and its indexation to the regime of places that structure a situation, P.\(^4\)

If this all sounds terribly abstract, Collerson asserts its direct political application. He targets my charge that Badiou posits the state as ‘infinitely errant’ in its power, which is why I charge that his thought can allow no possibility for immanent political change:

If we consider the national situation, individuals are presented as elements but are re-presented as parts: citizens and non-citizens, tax-payers, trade unionists and bosses, ethnic minorities, et cetera, in order to fix them to a set of structural places; to hold together an indifferent multiplicity in a consistent ‘one’ nation. What is important is that these included determinations have a quantitative power (number) in errant excess of the presented situation as such; an individual relates to this errant infinity as having ‘alienating and repressive powers of indeterminacy’, what we have just been writing Ap(A).\(^5\)

And here is Collerson’s key reversal. I am taken to misread the force of this ‘errancy’, in a too pessimistic way. Badiou himself says, ‘the resignation that characterises a time without politics feeds on the fact that the State is not at a distance, because the measure of its power is errant’.\(^6\) In truth, the errant infinite power of the state is actually the ground of the possibility of the immanent political change I cannot see in Badiou.

That the state is a fictionalization of what it duplicates means that parts do not necessarily rely on elements for their existence ... By allowing fictions to exist in the situation, the state itself

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3 Collerson, ‘Negation and Politics’, p. 211.
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creates the possibility of a breakdown of the structure, that it might have missed or included something it should not have.\(^7\)

Hence, later, Collerson concludes: 'The infinite power of the state does not limit possibilities for the Left, but creates them; in the last instance the subject is the product of its own impasse, or \(A = (AAp)\)'.\(^8\)

At the deepest level, Collerson thinks that what is at issue in all of these shortcomings of my Badiou is that I do not understand what philosophy allegedly has always been: 'to set out the possibility of thinking against the state under the condition of the state'.\(^9\) This largest or metaphilosophical error has several consequences. On one side, I fall unhappily into 'what Lenin referred to as economism: the attribution of philistinism to practice, or the separation of thought from politics'.\(^10\) On another — in seeming tension with this — when I point out that ‘many militants, or any other political agents’ have probably not reflected on whether their worldly projects are ‘worthy of Thought’ by philosophers, I ‘presuppose a role for philosophy within militant projects after having noted that Badiou holds the opposite view’. The question that I above all do not ask is: ‘What is a time \(with\) politics?’\(^11\) if I am to criticize Badiou for being unable to ‘save’ the Left.

Amongst the virtues of Collerson’s strident critique of my Badiou is that it allows me to set out very forthrightly our complete difference of opinion, and in terms of how we understand philosophy and (its relation to) politics. I have to say very strongly that I do not know where the idea that philosophy has always been ‘to set out the possibility of thinking against the state under the condition of the state’ comes from, nor to what notion of philosophy it refers. It certainly does not refer to political philosophy as it was practised from Plato through to Marx. For what are we then to make of Plato’s \(Laws\) or \(Statesman\), or Aristotle’s \(Politics\), if not attempts to decide on the best form of public authority, if not ‘state’? The true provenance of Badiou’s definition of philosophy here is actually the post-philosophical theory hailing

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8 Collerson, ‘Negation and Politics’, p. 213.
10 Collerson, ‘Negation and Politics’, p. 218. Lenin’s argument in \(What\ \text{is} \ \text{to} \ \text{be} \ \text{Done}\)? (1902) is that the working class is spontaneously validating the view that communism is their self-emancipation, but that his fellow intellectuals see workers as very limited, only being able to engage in ‘economic’ struggles and ‘hip-pocket’ issues, not ‘political’ struggle, which should be left to the enlightened middle classes. He repeatedly accuses his contemporaries of attributing their own philistinism to workers. See V. Lenin, \(What\ \text{is} \ \text{to} \ \text{be} \ \text{Done}\)? (1902), Moscow, Progress, 1978, pp. 63–4.
from Paris since the early 1960s, of which Badiou has otherwise been one of the best polemical critics.

Readers have also to note the stunningly ahistorical notion of the 'state' here: for Badiouians it refers ultimately to any ordering principle which 'counts as one', an otherwise disordered multiplicity of elements, in all fields from mathematical set theory to Parisian politics. To cite Collerson:

What does that mean?
If our situation is the infinite set of 'all natural numbers', we can count out a supplementary set of its squares. The elements — 1, 2, 3, 4, et cetera — belong to the situation, the part — 1, 4, 9, 16, et cetera — is included. The 'state of the situation' duplicates the situation by including every conceivable part in order to delimit the situation's 'void', viz. the underlying and indifferent multiplicity that testifies that the structure might be otherwise — what we have just been calling the absent cause. 12

But the political state is, historically, a modern institution. In the pre-modern world there were poleis, there were empires, princedoms, fiefdoms, tribes — all manner of collective organizations. But there was nothing of the order of the modern 'state', with its rationally (as against patrimonially) organized bureaucratic structures, its founding dissolution and consolidation of older geographical and parochial unities, its newly unified currencies and its rationalized general laws. The English word 'state' and its cognates (stato in Italian, etat in French, Staat in German and Estado in Spanish and Portuguese) derive from the Latin status: something's 'standing', 'condition' or 'status'. With the revival of the Roman law in the fourteenth century in Europe, this Latin term came to refer to the legal 'standing' of persons (the various 'estates of the realm'), including the privileged status of the monarch.

However, these are not the modern meanings of the word, which clearly (and absurdly) colours Badiou's false homology between the mathematical and political 'states'. Only after the consolidation of the modern nation-states in the seventeenth century did the word lose its reference to particular social groups and take on its modern meaning, wherein it names the legal order of the entire society and the apparatus of its enforcement. 13

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12 Collerson, 'Negation and Politics', p. 212.

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I do not mean to be pedantic; the point is simply to repeat my original article's critique of Badiou's philosophical Platonism: his tendency to over-burden *a priori*, ultimately mathematical, theoretical rationality. This is to miss what the Marxist heritage, which is more Aristotelian and empirically grounded, emphasizes: namely that the meaning of political institutions and practice changes dialectically over time, depending on the changing historical parameters they are situated in. The modern state was a progressive force in dismantling the old feudal social relations, and enabling the emancipation of people from indentured servitude and fiefdom. Arms of the state can and have opposed other arms with real progressive force, as recently as the judiciary challenging the power grabs of the British, American and Australian executives. To only think against the state, *a priori*, seems strategically limited and theoretically retrograde, even romanticist ("authority is bad, man", et cetera). I wonder what notion of the human condition underlies some of the more openly messianic motifs so popular in contemporary theory: the notion of a society which does not have any formal laws or agencies to enforce them seems like the type of utopianism that Marx's attempt to ground socialism in social science would prevent.

In truth, what I think Collerson does not see — and perhaps could not imagine — is that this author brings to political theory a very different set of presuppositions than that shaped by the French thinkers of 1968. This author is not even sure that many of their presuppositions have not been directly responsible for today's widened gulf between theory and progressive political movements. When writing on politics, I come out of a training in political philosophy and the history of political ideas. This tradition, one more discipline post-68 'end of philosophy' was supposed to consign to history's dustbin, does insist that there is a gulf between theorin, the business of philosophers interested in *a priori* and necessary things, and praxis, the business of engaged political agents contesting what is just and possible for political beings, amongst the things they might feasibly change through concerted action.

Political philosophers must ascend out of people's confused and contested opinions about political matters towards truths — for example, mathematical truths — which might provide them with standards to adjudicate what is possible or desirable. However, this ascent is not enough, as Collerson acknowledges I contend. Philosophers must then also undertake the difficult business of bringing their ideas back to the ground of political practice,
including convincing others of the abiding worth of their views. This means they must have or develop an adequate, empirically based understanding of the way political life actually works, as well as rhetoric with which — if they are progressive thinkers — many people could feasibly identify. Otherwise, the philosopher’s prescriptions for political change will remain utopian or messianic.

Elsewhere I have called this situation the ‘polito-philosophical difference’, for readers with an eye for buzzwords. Politics and philosophy concern different realms, and political philosophy is the reflective discipline which tries to mediate or bring them together. This understanding of political philosophy is preserved in its way in the heritage of critical theory in Germany, but has disappeared completely from France over the last one hundred years. This difference of politics and philosophy is not a ‘metaphysical’ difference — but one between metaphysical concerns for timeless things and the realm of human action, concerning desirable and changeable things. But nor can it be defined away, as Collerson or Badiou does, by begging the question and simply declaring ‘politics is thought’. Our theorists are not tyrannical Hobbesian sovereigns, so we should be loath to let them make words mean whatever they say they should. And then there is the question, which type of thought?

This brings me to my next point. Collerson has misrepresented me when he accuses me of taking most people’s politics as characterized by ‘philistinism’. The point is that ordinary people’s politics has its own intrinsic dignity, indeed its own *sui generis* species of rationality, namely *phronesis*, or practical reason. So my answer to Collerson’s further charge that I do not seem to believe there ever was a period ‘with politics’ has to be, actually, ‘there is always politics, although its forms change historically’. *Phronesis*, as I tried to explain by citing Aristotle in my initial essay, is that type of reason which concerns changeable things that humans can enact or reject, based on their estimations of what seems desirable in the complex circumstances of practical life, and given the plurality of different people and the plurality of different goods we can all pursue. (All this for Badiouians is of course ‘beneath the dignity of thought’.) A reference to *phronesis* may not satisfy the mathematician, as it will not the avant-garde artist, both of whose

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practices involve suspending and transcending this exactly 'mundane' (of the political world) form of reasoning. *Phronesis* is an art of the possible, or not a productive *tekhne* at all, issuing as it rather does in *praxeis*, practical actions. In complex modern societies, whose material and political reproduction depend on the development of media-steered subsystems (pre-eminently the economy) where the vast number of practical actions by individuals produce quasi-natural regularities (like economic laws), *phronesis* actually demands that we defer, on certain questions concerning what is possible, to the social sciences.

So if I were to tell the type of master story a lot of post-1968 theory does, I would say that what has been lost to modern philosophy is an appreciation of the irreducibility and importance of *phronesis*. Philosophy, always more at home in theoretical activities, turned with the burgeoning modern age to a species of technical or instrumental rationality, the type embodied in modern science. The sciences, it was hoped, would relieve the human estate, making us 'masters and possessors of nature' (Descartes). And so it seemed that we would have no need for the circumstantial, probabilistic, normative and unsystematizable business of practical reason. Amongst other things, as with Badiou, we would hence see no need to wonder whether our purely theoretical constructs could ever have relevance in political life, short of more or less violently or technologically imposing them from on high. Political philosophy for Aristotle was by contrast a species of *phronesis*, practical, not purely theoretical reason.

So when Collerson accuses me of scholasticism for not supporting Badiou's paean to absolutely, even mathematically, unforeseeable events, he is very much in the orbit of the type of modern philosophy that I would charge has deleteriously abstracted, too far, from the fabric of political life. The result is the characteristic post-1968, post-structuralist rhetoric of absolute indiscernibility, undecidability, incalculability — as if to form a set of political programs based on a concrete, material sense of what a more just distribution of the goods and duties of shared life might involve is somehow 'scholastic'. This grants way too much, as far as I can see, to the powers that be, who are quite happy to be 'scholastic' in their international forums and financial houses, while the academic Left angsts over the possibility that the allegedly infinite power of the state might create 'evental sites' and so on.

Of course, Collerson is right that currently we are seeing how the
present world order, like all political orders, does produce contradictions, in this case a contradiction between fictitious capital and its basis in the real economy. Yet we do not need the baroque sanction of a French maître penseur and set theory to allow us to predict and map this. If the Left is to strategically intervene, we need political economics and the ability to generate an alternative set of arrangements to re-gear the world economy so it is less destructive, and whole communities are held less in sway to its inhuman irrationality.

There are a lot more points about my article that Collerson, perhaps because of space, could not consider. Let me close for my part by answering a question Badiou asks about his hero, Plato. This is the question of how could the first great philosopher, who decisively broke with the poetic-mythological orbit of the pre­philosophical Greeks, also come to write the theological Book X of Plato’s Laws, in which he expels the sophists, invoking ‘the sombre knotted scheming of ecstasy, the sacred and terror’, in this way exposing ‘the whole of his thinking to disaster’.15

We can answer by recourse to Plato’s other key dialogue in political philosophy, The Republic. The Republic also advocates a fairly austere theology, complete with noble lies to pacify and train the ideal regime’s guardians.16 Throughout, the author serves us notice that the wholly philosophical scheme is very problematic and even an edifying lie17 because it tries impossibly to dictate ‘thought’ to the political realm, ultimately by proposing the complete change of people’s habits in love and gender. Yet the key addressee for Socrates’ tall tale, who does not get the joke, is a passionate young man, Plato’s younger brother, named Glaucon. Glaucon continues to be enamoured by the vision of the kallipolis, or polis in speech, right to the end, when Socrates tells him that to truly start a new, philosophically Just City, we would have to kill or expel all adults over ten ‘into the fields’, so we could shape the children according to wisdom. It is not too harsh to say that Glaucon is a fool. But then, as Plato shows us in The Republic book VII, he is not a fool in all things. As book VII would have it, our hot­blooded young friend is particularly good at geometry, for the Greeks the highest form of mathematics.

16 The Republic, 377b–398b.
17 See The Republic, 414c–d; 420b–e; 422b–433c; 450a–451b; 452a–b; 457c–458c; 472a–472b.

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