The Event, the Subject, and the Artwork

Into the Twenty-First Century

Edited by
Ann McCulloch
R. A. Goodrich
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INTRODUCING EVENTS, SUBJECTS, ARTWORKS: THE "MODERNIST" CENTURY AND BEYOND

A.M. MCCULLOCH
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
AND R.A. GOODRICH
A.R.C. CENTRE FOR THE HISTORY OF EMOTIONS – UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

Guided in part by Alain Badiou’s controversial The Century and its interpretation of events and related art of the last century in terms of “not what took place in the century, but what was thought in it” (2005, 3), this book opens debates around these concepts for the twenty-first century. Badiou repeatedly saw the last century as having a “passion for the real” (2005, 64, 99, 108, 131-132 & 150-151). In acknowledging its genocidal terror and horror, he nevertheless asks his readers to acknowledge what he previously called its “emancipatory politics” (1992, 147ff.). To what extent can we apply this perspective to the first decades of the twenty-first century, that is, to what extent can analyses of events in the modernist period be re-thought from the viewpoint of this century? By contrast, Gilles Deleuze (1988) sees an event as a synthesis of forces, not a happening, but something that has become actual. Therefore, an event is always there in its potentiality, but may not be recognised at the time of its occurrence. An event has no goal; it is pure effect. It is not based on any prior model; it is a creative and original production and it emerges as a rupture of the times from new immanent but not determinate forces. An event may carry a momentary productive intensity. It will signal new creative possibilities, but will be about “becoming” rather than “being.” In the light of these thinkers amongst others, this book will invoke events of the twentieth and twenty-first century as well as artistic responses to them.

Collectively, as signalled by its title, this anthology focuses upon the relationship between the subject, the event, and the arts. The subject may be a person (artist, thinker, activist) who might designate an event or
The second half of the twentieth century saw the rise of an entrenched relationship between the modern state and corporate capitalism that unleashed globally systemic economic and political inequities, neo-colonialisation, and a de-politicisation of the public realm. What we are left with in the contemporary era, as both Hannah Arendt’s and Alain Badiou’s political theories contend, is an impasse in which the facility for a real politics in the public domain has been eradicated.

Arendt and Badiou propose a real politics of spontaneous action to initiate new beginnings, both thinkers prescribing a politically performed egalitarianism and inclusivism against modern forms of inequity and disenfranchisement. However, politics means something profoundly different for each thinker. The source of this difference, I propose, is to be found in their individual readings of the earlier part of what Badiou calls the “short century” and whose paradigm was war. This chapter analyses both Arendt’s and Badiou’s readings of the twentieth century, focusing specifically on Badiou’s The Century (2005) as well as some of Arendt’s works with the aim of not only marking the radical difference in their political thinking, but also illuminating the century’s relationship to the current era, as one that arguably continues the antagonism that characterised the previous century.

By maintaining a dialogue between Arendt’s and Badiou’s political views regarding the twentieth century, and examining where their respective theories converge and diverge, we also interrogate whether Badiou’s formalist evental philosophy offers a radical, liberating beginning for humanity or whether it undermines its own intent of initiating the new. Badiou posits that he does not seek to “rehabilitate the century but only to think it, and thus to show how it is thinkable” (2005, 6). Nevertheless, as this chapter will explore, his reading of it is both highly subjective and polemical. Can it be argued then that Badiou’s philosophical engagement with the ideas of the nineteenth century as well as the events of the twentieth century, as a century of unprecedented and aggressive novelty, betrays a desire to complete the modernist project? It opens the question that I believe haunts Badiou’s project and its engagement with discourses of the past: is it new enough?

In Badiou’s reading of the antagonistic twentieth century in The Century, the middle of the century was a period of intense innovation untrammelled by moral considerations that would limit it. However, with the cementing of the West’s global economic and political hegemony at the end of the Cold War, innovation was at an end and reactive humanist values were reinstated. It was significantly the moment when the “triumph of capitalism and the global market” was reached in the ruins of what had previously been a short century of intense emancipation (2005, 2). Rather than take on the force of the status quo, Badiou upholds an interrupting radical politics in the form of the event to effect radical socio-political transformation. As Oliver Feltham (2010, 23) notes, the instrument for inhabiting a discourse that one wishes to transform is through polemics. So, as Badiou writes, “Our aim is not to judge the century as an objective datum, but rather to ask how it has come to be subjectivized” in order to grasp its “immanent prescription” (2005, 6).

As Patrick Hayden (2010, 110) argues, Arendt’s own critique of a modern, totalising, capitalist, commodified society condemns the eradication of the political public domain and the ability to have a political life. Arendt writes: “The limitless process of capital accumulation needs the political of so ‘unlimited a Power’ that it can protect growing property by constantly growing more powerful” (1958, 143). Politics for Arendt is pluralist and participatory. It recognises our humanness not only in that we are unique individuals in a connected world, but also in its equation with freedom. Only a “real” politics can produce new beginnings. In its absence, where power is concentrated in the state, we are left to construe humankind not as mortal with the potential of performing great deeds, but as part of nature within an encompassing whole called biological life (1968, 42-43). Within this totality, individuals are condemned to what Arendt termed the “social,” or, as Seyla Benhabib expresses it, “an amorphous, anonymous, uniformizing reality” (1996, 23). Arendt elaborates:

Society is the form in which the fact of mutual dependence for the sake of life and nothing else assumes public significance and where the activities connected with sheer survival are permitted to appear in public. (1998, 46)
What Badiou terms the short century covers the period that began with World War One and ends with the rise of Western capitalist hegemony in the 'eighties. What Badiou takes from the short century is an affirmation of its singular erupting power for transformation of the human animal. Philosophy is reinstated and re-conceptualised anew in our own era as a contemporaneous rethinking of Marx's nineteenth-century communist project with its promise of "a world to win" (2005, 137). The short century strove to actualise what the nineteenth century thought, and was therefore an epoch whose thrust aimed to achieve radical forms of human emancipation. While Arendt viewed the century as one that profoundly undermined the human condition, for Badiou it constituted the threshold to a new humanity by inflicting a sustained radical break with the "beast of history" (2005, 15). Arendt's political theories are underscored by what a century of totalitarianism and a novel politics of radical violence had unleashed. Given the sheer scale of human destruction, she saw that the events of the twentieth century were likely to be the precursor for a violent and dehumanised future.

In Badiou's subjective analysis of the century, his aim is to make a compelling argument for its emancipatory intent as the century that conceived of the possibility of radical change set free from moral limitations. What interests the philosopher in our own era is not what the century did, but what it thought was previously both unthought and unthinkable, and thus what was thought that was peculiar to that century. In Badiou's words, how did it "identify the thinking singularity of the relation it entertained with the historicity of its own thought" (2005, 3)? Such an interrogation might identify the "actual operation of denials of truth" that condemn the century to moral judgement by the reactive nihilism which came to the fore in the 'eighties and which ended projects of radical emancipation (2005, 3). It would be too easy to view Arendt's stance as providing the voice of moral conscience against the horrors of the twentieth century, and thus as an upholder of the later century's moral values that Badiou abhors. Arendt's deeper concern, however, is not with a politics that promotes human rights, but with the loss of the very conditions of our humanness that the century through terror sought to negate. The most profound of these conditions is our facility to act. I propose that Arendt's positing of "the right to have rights" is not intended to be enshrined in law, a thesis forwarded by Hayden (2010, 24), but is intended to be politically performed in the contingent public arena toward the development of a wider and inclusive consciousness.

What the substantial middle period of the century thought, for Badiou, as an epoch that witnessed two world wars, was the rise of both left wing and right wing totalitarianism. Violent revolution in both China and Russia, wreaking profound human devastation, was the prescription of the radical creative new that could progress only when divested of moral inhibitions. The extent of barbarity and slaughter that characterised the short century, together with the emergence of radical political novels such as state-sponsored genocide and warfare targeting civilian populations, and unprecedented levels of statelessness, cannot be divorced from either its imperialist colonial ambitions or from what constituted its prologue—the belle époque, according to Badiou—as the gloriously creative two decades that preceded it. Violence in the short century, he argues, was imbued with an aesthetic rather than a moral dimension. As Andrew Koch (2009, 119) observes, The Century's central premise is the Nietzschean contention that "Our essential relation to the world, the lens by which we invigorate life with meaning and which serves as the wellspring of activity, is aesthetic."

In contrast to Arendt's normative theory of politics, Badiou's radical formalist philosophy advocates a militant break with the status quo, to eradicate, as Marx (1852: 5) declared, "The tradition of all dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living." However, it is Nietzsche rather than Marx that Badiou singles out as having specific significance for the new. Not only does he conceive of a Nietzschean overcoming that is freed from repressive moral injunctions, but it is one that liberates us from modernity's predilection for humanism, both of which as noted above were reinstated in the 'eighties, the so-called X restoration. In a direct referencing of Nietzsche's The Gay Science, Badiou writes that "God is dead, means that man is dead too. Man, the last man, the dead man, is what must be overcome for the sake of the overman" (2005, 168). Badiou continues, "The twentieth century thus begins...under the theme of man as programme and no longer as given" (2005, 168). Can it be said then that Badiou's own avowed communist universalist project is a continuation of the thinking of the modernist era which envisaged "man as programme"?

The short century envisaged itself as a threshold to a new age and it did so radically by redefining the relationship between life and death that reversed tradition underscored by metaphysics, so that in the nihilistic age death became the instrument of life. The antagonistic century that witnessed unprecedented forms of mass human destruction, welcomed, indeed, desired, its engagement with the unmediated real. In Badiou's terms, "The century unflinchingly maintained that life can only accomplish its positive destiny (and design) through terror" (2005, 16). The century was characterised by a Deleuzian "disjunctive-synthesis"
of nihilistic exhaustion—in which human beings are internally divided within themselves and totally lack any idea of the transcendent—or an end as well as a Dionysian affirmation that declared for the greater part of the century radical new beginnings. It was thus “haunted by a non-dialectical relationship between necessity and will” (2005, 31). Where movement violently confronted stasis, it enacted Nietzsche’s dictum to “break the history of the world in two” (cited in Badiou 2001, 4). What the century confirmed was the Dionysian affirmation, from destruction comes new beginnings. Jason Barker, for example, notes how Badiou adheres to Mao Tse-Tung’s classical theory of contradiction: “the world is constantly reborn from the ruins of social conflict” (2002, 21).

While Marx conceptualised a communist project with collectivist potential for initiating radical change, what Nietzsche’s will to power proposed in the nineteenth century, and the twentieth century interpreted toward its own ends, was absolute rupture in the creation of the new man or overman, not as political praxis but as a novel way of humanity thinking of itself. As Arendt remarks in the section on “Willing” in The Life of the Mind, Nietzsche’s vitalist idea of transcendence as overcoming holds that “it is the extravagance and recklessness of an overflowing spendthrift will that opens up a future beyond all past and present” (1978, 169). Nevertheless, she suggests that “the sensuous lust of the Dionysian principle” becomes destructive “because abundance can afford destruction” (1978, 163).

Unmediated violence in the short century, unparalleled in its sheer scale, was legitimized in the quest for the new man. Badiou writes that it is “the new man that holds together the fragments of the disjunctive synthesis”; the new man “is at once the destiny (the destiny of humanity in the epoch of the death of the gods) and a will (the will to overcome the man of the past)” (2005, 32). For Badiou, this was how the century saw its destiny, to be reached through the paradoxical realisation that the “vital continuity of life” can only achieve its objectives through “voluntaristic discontinuity” (2005, 16). However, if the twentieth century viewed itself as a threshold to a new age, it was one without a crossing, as Badiou points out through a reading of The Age, Osip Mandelstam’s poem of his own destabilised Russia (2005, 11-22). The radical revolution that the century undertook was ultimately confounded in its last decades by a reactive nihilism that morally denounces it: “A restoratio is above all an assertion regarding the real, to wit, that it is always preferable to have no relation to it whatsoever” (2005, 26).

It is difficult not to respond critically to Badiou’s reading of the extreme century as a celebration of the radical new within an overriding contention that all is possible, not merely for its polemical repudiation of the human cost of radical emancipation, but because, where a “real” politics is believed by both Arendt and Badiou to be contingent and undecidable, the age gave itself the freedom to impose a formal structure for excessive political violence. The degree of militancy that Badiou’s affirmation allows is demonstrated in his reading of the excesses of Mao’s Cultural Revolution—although we might read this as pertaining as much to twentieth century revolution per se. As Ian Kershaw points out, abject terror against its people was as much a feature and an implement of the preceding Leninist and the Stalinist crass (2005, 112-113).

As a former Maoist, Badiou defends the Cultural Revolution as an unleashing of an “emancipator” event to free “the collective intelligence of workers” whatever this might mean (2005, 58). What is dismissed is the praxis of brutal deaths of millions of Chinese that ensued. He states, regarding the critical propensity for stating numbers with regard to the deaths, “it is entirely unjust to isolate this dimension of the passion for the real,” and continues, “total emancipation practiced in the present, in the enthusiasm of the absolute present, is always situated beyond ‘Good and Evil’” (2005, 63). Just as philosophy must be divested of its relationship to morality, so, too, the century understood that a “passion for the real” must be devoid of morality as a “residue of the old world” (2005, 63).

If a normative ethics condemns the emancipatory political project, an evental ethics is concerned only with fidelity or betrayal to the event. What is required of the subject of truth is consistency with regard to the event’s unknowingness. Badiou’s reading of Brecht’s The Decision confirms the century’s propensity for the collective over the individual. It is the collective “we” that will alone transform reality (2005, 119-123). Badiou believes that “I am right” and “I cannot give way,” which takes the form of separation from the “we,” is a moral conviction that “replaces politics with morality” (2005, 122).

The central problem that Brecht’s title suggests, as seen from an Arendtian perspective, is the problem of choice between betrayal of the cause and its punishment by death, and yielding to the collective and human agency which bestows power on the individual to stand firm in his or her own judgment. The young man’s resistance in The Decision must be met by his execution lest the revolution be jeopardised; his death is justified as a means to an end. Badiou’s position on purging is somewhat ambiguous. How, for instance, might Badiou’s consistency to an ethics of fidelity be maintained? This was something of a vexed question for a century which, in its Dionysian explosiveness, desired to purge itself in an excess of terror that Badiou suggests was in order to “grasp real identity,
to unmask its copies, to discredit its fakes” (2005, 56). Yet, because one can never be sure that the real is not mere semblance, the act of purgation fails in that it is always incomplete and requires continuation. Badiou remarks that “the logic of purification...amounts to bringing about nothing. Ultimately death is the sole possible name of freedom” (2005, 54). However, lest we mistakenly feel that Badiou is siding with morality in his exegesis, he would have us understand that purging has its uses. He correlates purging and artistic creativity when validating the avant-garde tendency toward aggressive anarchism (2005, 131-147). The century’s propensity for cruelty, for annihilation of the past and its values, must be aesthetically rather than morally defined, which he declares as “yet another debt to Nietzsche” (2005, 115).

In its radical emancipation, the short century according to Badiou confirmed a purely modernist partnership between artistic creativity and terror. It did so by engendering a free space not only for the artistic aim of compelling humanity to some excess with regard to itself” (2005, 160-161), but also for Sartre’s creativeness of terror. In support of Franz Fanon’s radical anti-colonial theories, Sartre, in his preface to The Wretched of the Earth, contends that only in unmediated violence can radical change be effected. For Badiou, the avant-garde collectives that emerged in the earlier part of the century with their aggressive iconoclastic repudiation of traditional and normative art offered them “the power of destruction” against what each moment presents as art, thereby corresponding to revolutionary politics (2005, 132-133).

While Arendt would agree that the project that consumed the twentieth century was the creation of inhuman being, can or, indeed, should the human cost of mass dehumanisation be ignored? For Arendt, the century was above all radically indifferent both to the world and to the human condition of plurality with the pernicious result, as Philip Hansen (1993, 202) acknowledges, that ‘Where thinking and politics go their separate ways, each ends up in a distorted mirror image of itself’ such as “the false communialism of a rule-regulated mass behaviour.” The twentieth century taught us that projects that deny or target human difference are notable for their eradication of freedoms. For Arendt, these are political concerns rather than moral ones. What remains in the face of total servility is our human capacity to think reflectively, but first we need to rise above the malaise and envisage this faculty as a political potential.

Arendt argues for our continuing subjective reflection on and evaluation of what modernity’s dire assault on the very conditions of our humanness means. Her political brief is to maintain pathways to “humane alternatives,” as Hansen expresses it, to “ensure that people make workable the checks and balances which would prevent the growth of unaccountable power and domination on the basis of adequate knowledge and the right to participate equally” (1993, 164). This can be achieved only through our recognition of our uniqueness as individuals in a pluralist world. Arendt argued that, when the thinking of men was abstracted to an idea of generic man by Thomas Hobbes’ Leviathan, the stage was set for political projects that came to the fore in the twentieth century. Such projects not only ceased to celebrate humanness, but sought its eradication through ideologies that rationalised the process of violent dehumanisation. They did this by denying through terror the very conditions of humanness in victims and perpetrators alike, thus ruthlessly negating the individual capacity for human agency.

In her lecture notes, “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” Arendt argues that, at no level within what she calls the “cog system,” can a functionary be absolved of the perpetration of a crime. In order to resist evil, she continues, one must employ the faculty of judgment as self-judgment about one’s own precepts. Those few who consciously chose not to engage in murderous or barbarous acts under the Nazi regime did so as a matter of personal conscience about events, evaluated in the moment and beyond received moral norms. She holds that more reliable than those who hold steadfastly to moral norms whatever they may be doubters and sceptics who utilise their capacity for thought towards individual evaluation. Certainly, Adolf Eichmann’s trial uncovered totalitarian strategies for legitimating the destruction of humanity where all moral standards were collapsed (1964, 1-10).

Marx and later Sartre espoused a radical humanism in the absence of God, wherein man must invent himself as an absolute. By contrast, Nietzsche and later Foucault conceived of the overcoming of man altogether as a radical inhumanism. Thus, it is singularly Nietzsche’s thinking that the nineteenth century constituted a Badiouan Event as an absolute break. Badiou’s “Who is Nietzsche?” acknowledges Nietzsche as the supreme anti-philosopher who spurred philosophy to “its modern task” (2001, 10) whose ideas continue to have something to say to the future. Yet is there value to be found in the traces of previous thinking?

If the short century saw itself on the brink of a new age and neither mourned its massed dead nor intervened in the prevention of further destruction, from whence came the nineteenth century dreams of utopia that drove it? In The Life of the Mind, Arendt alludes to the nineteenth century spirit of antiquity as an antidote to the problem of modernity to which not even Marx’s radical emancipatory philosophy was immune. She wrote:
It is striking...that the notion of the future—precisely a future pregnant with final salvation—brining back a kind of initial Golden Age, should have become popular at a time when Progress had come to be the dominant concept to explain the movement of History. And the most striking example of the resilience of that very old dream is of course Marx’s fantasy of a classless and waretag ‘realm of freedom’ as prefigured in ‘original communism’, a realm that has more than superficial resemblance to Saturn’s aboriginal Italic rule, when no laws fettered [men] to justice. (1978, 215)

It seems important to understanding the twentieth century that an idea of Return as well as Progress—an example of what Badiou refers to as the epoch’s “disjunctive synthesis”—significantly characterised the thinking of the nineteenth century. While Nietzsche found little to value in Plato, not only did he celebrate the culture of antiquity as a prescription to the sickness of modern culture, but took from ancient Greek rituals a concept of Dionysus. Arendt draws attention to the reality that antiquity played a significant role for nineteenth century thinkers, notably German idealists, imbued with an idea of the perfect society. Badiou, in his philosophical revisiting of Plato and St Paul in the contemporary era, acknowledges, “When a step forward is the order of the day, one may, among other things find assistance in the greatest step back” (2003: 2). To this end, Saint Paul is revived as a model of a militant universalism for the current era.

Is there nothing new under the sun then? Arendt would answer in the affirmative. Every act of real politics as a politics of freedom, as with every birth, constitutes a new beginning. Arendt’s reading of the twentieth century as one witnessing mass human destruction and homelessness of millions mirrors her politics in keeping it real, freed from the idea or system that would contain or control it for its own objectives. In contrast, Badiou’s The Century, as distinct from his other abstract works, offers an uncharacteristically romantic and indeed tragic view of these same events in an approach that is simply literary. What is required in the current era is a collective heroism, a political subjectivity that is convoked in the evental moment that is faithful and constant to the sundering evental truth in the face of adversity. Further, the century taught us that violence can be rethought as action. Nevertheless, as Badiou points out, this is not a new idea. In keeping with his proposal of an aesthetic rather than moral interpretation of events, a trace of the distant past is referenced to illuminate the present. On reading The Iliad, which “consists of an uninterrupted succession of massacres,” Badiou notes that

in its movement as a poem this is not presented as barbarous, but instead as epic and heroic. The century has been a subjective Iliad—even if barbarity has often been acknowledged and condemned usually by the other camp. (2005, 33)

In the caesura left by the events of the short century, for Arendt, as Hayden explains, “the tangible reality of humanity and the dangers inherent within it is not simply bare fact—it is an urgent problem that demands new forms of political action, but with the recognition that such forms of action will come up against other actions that limit and contradict them” (2010, 20). To address the horrors of the historical moment, Arendt promoted a contemporary cosmopolitanism. There is considerable critical debate about what Arendt’s cosmopolitanism stands for and whether it is effective in the political realm. Rather than engage with this debate, I would agree with Hayden who explains it as a critical realist form of cosmopolitanism which acknowledges that justice in the face of immanent evil can only ever be imperfect (2010, 18-20). What therefore comes to the fore in Arendt’s thinking is an active, non-foundational politics that is always contingent and undecided—the price we pay for a politics of freedom—that performs an intersubjective egalitarianism and is at once agonal and inclusivist. To ignore the fact of human plurality would distort any political theory. Arendt’s charge against Marx and Plato is that ideology and philosophy have no role to play in what should be the free play of politics as speech and action, and alone from which truth emerges (1968, 234-236). The significance of politics to the human condition is, as Arendt contends, that there is nothing between life and death but political action to bring about new beginnings and which alone “interrupts the circular movement of biological life” (1968, 42):

The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, ‘natural’ ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted. It is, in other words, the birth of new men and the new beginning, the action they are capable of by virtue of being born. Only the full experience of this capacity can bestow upon human affairs faith and hope. (1998, 247)

Contrary to Badiou’s positing of an intrinsic aesthetic connection between the events of the antagonistic century and the intensely creative belle époque preceding it, there is the decidedly Arendtian view that the earlier period, which Badiou views as the prelude to the short century, was dominated by an unprecedented innovative cosmopolitanism that the later period erased. Badiou declares that the belle époque’s historically unprecedented, radically innovative creative thrust translated in the later period to a desire to produce the new man. The perfection of man, as he rightly points out, was not only the objective of modern science, but also
that of the new radical ideology of both the left and the right. As Badiou indicates, while Marx envisaged a new revolutionary class, fascism looked to an imagined ancient elite for its vision of the future. At the centre of these projects was the idea of man abstracted from his humanity, man as “material,” man as “programme.” For Badiou, the correlation, therefore, between the belle époque and the profound violence of the short century is, in a word, emancipation. He writes: “the project of the new man is a project of rupture and foundation that sustains—within the domain of history and the state—the same subjective tonality” of the profoundly creative earlier period (2005, 8).

What Badiou’s conceptualisation of the relationship between the belle époque and the later century lacks is an historical basis that would view the former as having politically constituted a counterpart to the latter violent events and to dominant nineteenth-century discourses. Against ideologies of dehumanisation and the strand of pernicious racism that persisted in the period, exemplified in the literature of Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, and buoyed by a brief moment of prosperity and political stability, a plurality of individual creative minds was drawn to the Continent’s energised and dynamic cultural centres such as Paris and Berlin (Streecker 2011, 23-28). The belle époque constituted the brief flowering of cosmopolitanism’s creative, innovative genius. In this sense, it was pluralism that was the creative new.

From this perspective, the belle époque was not Badiou’s innovative prologue to which the short century remained ferociously faithful (2005, 8). Instead, its demise, with the advent of the Great War, comprised a sundering of a rare, intensely artistic historical moment that created pluralist public spaces for all comers. Under the totality of Nazi ideology, minority art, notably Jewish art, was classed as degenerate, its artists vilified (Streecker 2011, 259). With the advent of the Great War, too, there began an infamous period of art’s suturing to the state under Stalin and an aestheticisation of the political under Hitler. The human capacity for artistic creativity was subversively reduced to political propaganda or the means to effect human destruction. Man’s “self-alienation,” wrote Walter Benjamin in 1936, “has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure” (1936, 242). The capacity for an emancipatory politics inherent in cosmopolitanism was to drive Arendt’s political theories in the aftermath of the World War Two.

The continued interest in Arendt’s political theories confirms that they offer an alternative to the dominant liberal democracy. Not only does Arendt set her politics apart from political forms such as representative democracy ineluctably tied to the economic order, but also from rational formalist political theories with their tendency toward compulsion and co-option. Not even Habermas’ theory of communication, which comes close in many respects to her thinking, can escape censure with its focus upon rational consensus. Radically open-ended, the value of Arendt’s politics rests in providing an enlargement of perspective toward a greater understanding of the shared world. Human agency, judgment and reconciliation are keywords. With the diminution of thinking-as-judgment, exemplified by Eichmann, she beseeches us to think what we are doing. Badiou, however, takes an opposing stance to Arendt’s politics, which, he declares, is devoid of political power, focused as it is on normative ideas of plurality and opinion. He argues that the potential of “inhuman rival of being,” as the power of militant collective action, can occur only through an enactment of “univocity” whereby all judgment is suspended:

The overhuman is that which, having dispensed with particularities, withdraws from interpretation. If the work must be interpreted, if it can be interpreted, it is because too much particularity still survives within it, because it has failed to reach the pure transparency of the act, because it has not bared it real. Such a work is not yet univocal. But every univocity is the result of a formalization whose localizable real is constituted by the act. (2005, 163)

Both Arendt and Badiou contend that, in the contemporary era’s liberal-capitalist dominance, state power remains unabated and unchallenged. According to Badiou, “we are living through the revenge of what is most blind and objective in the economic appropriation of technics over what is most subjective and voluntary in politics” (2005, 9). Furthermore, he notes that, in the current era, science and technics driven by capitalism alone assumes the new man project. Thus, there is a need for a political project towards a violent emancipation. A politics that is equal to the totality of the economic order is necessarily and militantly eventful; it is a radical intervention that must necessarily exceed the order of being. Oliver Marchart defines it as one that “can be theorized as the dysfunction of the regime of the One” (2007, 112). It is both post-Marxist and post-foundational beyond any idea of universalism, necessarily transcending traditional forms of communism that were unable to offer anything more, in Feltham terms, than “a marginal and unguaranteed future” (2010, 20).

Instead, there must be “a return to authenticity” by means of an ethics of truth derived, as Marchart suggests, from Jacques Lacan’s ethics of the real in order to make possible the impossible (2007, 114). In an approximation of Lacan’s “do not give up on your desire,” Badiou beseeches the political subject in his Ethics: “Do all that you can to persevere in that which exceeds your perseverance” (1998a, 47). The
objective of the event in the contemporary age is conceptualised as an "outside-ness" to the totalising status quo that politically performs a universal "singularity." However, as Jason Barker (2002) proposes, there is something of a leap between Badiou’s "conception of the localised singularity of the political truth procedure and the social transformation it claims to effect in that both are operating on the same level." Badiou asks that, "if politics is not...the construction and animation of a new and singular collective, aiming for the control and transformation of what is, what can it be?" (1998b, xi) Barker (in his introduction to Badiou 1998b, xxiii) draws attention to the problematic how so? Without a conceptualisation of progress, he argues, politics can only stand opposed, and not for anything.

In so far as Arendt’s theories are both historically and politically situated, not only was the century one of profound human cost, but, as she says in the preface to the first 1951 edition of Origins of Totalitarianism, a consequence is that the world has been divided between “human omnipotence,” a belief that everything is possible, and “those for whom powerlessness has become a major experience of their lives.” In Arendt’s evaluation of the century’s legacy to future generations, it initiated new forms of human crisis that irrevocably transformed the political landscape. As the violent beginning of our own twenty-first century testifies, the glorification of violence continues. Not only are the forces of global capitalism responsible for violence in the international arena, but we are also witnessing the growth of extreme forms of terrorism as radical protest, rising sectarian violence punctuated by attacks of ethnic cleansing, massacres by states against their own civilians, and the global phenomenon of overwhelming refugee numbers. Traces of the recent past continue to haunt the present and we live now in an age where labels such as “exile, refugee, enemy and stranger are normalized” (Hayden 2010, 18).

For Badiou, as I have argued, the century affirmed the radical creative power of the passion for the real. What I see was the start of the project in his short century of a formalised inhuman beginning. Its objective has shown itself as the annihilation of what Arendt held to be the fundamental human conditions of human complexity and difference and a non-formalised politics of discourse. In Badiou’s unequivocal words, “what the century desires...is a universality without remainder, without any adherence to any particularism whatsoever” (2005, 161). Badiou sets himself a formidable challenge to re-think the current malaise through the event as well as to define a new ethics of commitment to radical change. Toward this objective he presents the emancipatory idea in works that are collectively an experimental work-in-progress. However, in this new philosophy’s engagement with the thinking of the past, in its materialist appropriation of Platonism and Paulinism, and in its engagement with the modernist promises of the nineteenth century, can it effectively escape the “beast of history” in order to engender the novel event of non being? What of the cost of so radical an emancipation? The short century’s radical drive to emancipation failed to deliver anything but a perniciously reduced and impoverished socio-political landscape, one so much leaner than at its artistically innovative start.

I agree with Don Callen’s contention in his 2008 review that it does matter that, in Badiou’s argument, there is a blatant indifference to human suffering. As Arendt illuminates, we cannot, indeed, we should not, evade thinking of the human cost of formalised inhumanity in concrete terms, not only of the sheer scale of human destruction, but of dehumanised violence as a political idea. This, after all, was what the short century has irrevocably bequeathed to the future.

Bibliography


Event Horizon

The event has the quality of being thrown forth, apparently presented rather than represented. The simple etymology of the word itself—e + venus (from the verb to come)—already had this sense for the Romans. English also preserves the Latin distinction between kinds of happenings or events: things that befall me are accidents (accido, accidere); things that happen to me are contingencies (contingo, contingere). Perhaps too, the ordinary English parergon to the event needs noting: we say an event has taken place: the event, it seems, requires the possibility of colonising space, of taking something, namely, place. Again, in English, an event occurs (from Latin occurro, I run to meet or run together, the encounter, in other words) or happens, an even more peculiar word from Old and Middle English, where the idea of chance is at stake.

Like the word, the event comes from, comes out of, is simply just there, presented. But this is already a problem, since events are understood as part of a context or, to draw on Heidegger (e.g. 1944/1945, 63ff), a horizon. Yet the event also seems to defy meaning and horizon. We think we know, for instance, that events in some far place never seen by a human eye are happening, unrepresented, yet somehow present, perhaps in time with us, coeval yet unknown except as possibility. We depend on them, we think. In its apparent denial of horizontality, the pure event seems to be both necessary and utterly peculiar (in some degree). Some things seem to fold into horizons better than others. A slap in the face has a horizon because it makes sense to me even if I did not expect to receive it. Perhaps the unobserved tree falling in the forest has a horizon, an