



INTRODUCTION. THINKING WITH BADIOU

Giorgio Bertolotti¹

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

Stefano Pippa²

Università degli Studi di Milano-Bicocca

¹ giorgio.bertolotti@unimib.it

² stefano.pippa@unimib.it

Back in 2005, the philosopher to whom this issue of *Síntesis. Revista de Filosofía* is dedicated wrote: “There was in France a philosophical moment of the 1960s, to use an expression dear to Frederic Worms. Even those who have apparently tried to organize its forgetting know that. Not much more, perhaps, than those five intense years between 1962 and 1968, between the end of the war in Algeria and the revolutionary storm of the period 1968-1976. Just a moment, yes, but it really felt like a moment of searing intensity. We can say, now that Jacques Derrida is dead, that the philosophical generation which identified that moment is almost completely gone. [...]. The first feeling I experience is therefore not a very noble sentiment. I actually said to myself: We are the old ones now.” But no sooner had he confessed his sentiment than he felt the need to get clear about the reference of the first-person plural pronoun: “We . . . who are we? Well, to be quite specific, it means we who were the immediate disciples of those who have passed away. We who were aged between twenty and thirty in those years from 1962 to 1968, we who followed the lessons of those masters with passion, we who, as they grew old and died, have become the old ones. Not in the same sense that they were the old ones, because they were the signature of the moment of which I speak, and because the present moment probably does not deserve any signature. But we are the old ones who spent our entire youth listening to and reading such masters, and discussing their propositions day and night. We once lived in their shelter, despite everything. We were under their spiritual protection. They can no longer offer us that. We are no longer divorced from the real by the greatness of their voices.”³

No doubt the philosophical moment of the 1960s is gone, and nothing comparable to it seems to be detectable on the horizon; yet, the present collection of articles aims precisely at listening to a powerful voice that has since grown out of the lessons of those masters and that has been making pivotal contributions across multiple areas of philosophy. For it is apparent that Alain Badiou’s work has been an inescapable point of reference for contemporary philosophy for decades now, prompting in a unique way the renewal of interest in traditional philosophical themes that had long fallen into disrepute during the hegemony of what he labelled “democratic materialism”, whose motto is, as he famously epitomised it, “Live without Ideas”. The recent publication of the third, and perhaps final, volume of the (retrospectively constructed) trilogy on being and the event, *L’immanence des vérités* (2018), as well as its very recent English translation (2022),

³ Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon. Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, trans. David Macey, London : Verso, 2009, pp. 125-6.

makes the time particularly propitious for a further evaluation of his theoretical project and its persistent influence in the various domains of philosophical research.

But the time seems propitious for another, more conjunctural reason. If it is true that the fundamental question, ultimately simple in its radicality (as all genuine philosophical questions are), around which Badiou's research has revolved for over half a century consists in discerning what is truly new in a situation, then his quest finds its relevance today more than ever. The context of generalised crisis (war, climate crisis, rise of aggressive nationalisms, energy crisis, crisis of emancipatory agency...) and global structural readjustments that we have been witnessing, with a sudden acceleration, over the last three years, is the "situation" in which thought is bound to dwell at present and arguably in the years to come. As Badiou himself recently pointed out, the current crisis is largely a restructuring of the global capitalist system in which transformations are merely functional to the maintenance of the old order, when they are not simply the mere repetition of the false novelty of commodity. But in every crisis, cleavages are produced, and contradictions are at work.⁴ This also means: New possibilities begin, perhaps, to rise. To recognise the radically new possibilities, the ones irreducible to the constructivist language of the situation, heterogeneous to the parts already counted, however faintly they may shimmer in the moment of their emergence; to "activate" them – is this not what Badiou's philosophy imposes as the task of our present and our future? If so, this constitutes yet another reason to put his philosophical system to the test and probe its intrinsic capacity to provide thought with tools apt to this task.

This issue focuses, in particular, on two cornerstones of his philosophy: ontology (in a broad sense) and politics (in a broad sense), which are addressed by the authors of the essays collected here both directly, as an object of reflection and/or target of criticism, and indirectly, in their implications. As a whole, this collection of articles – which brings together contributions by scholars from different countries and continents – aims first and foremost to provide few selected *specimina* of the many directions in which – be it at the level of interpretation, or at that of inventive and critical dialogue – the reception of Badiou's work is currently developing within the contemporary philosophical scene.

The task we were talking about, and to which Badiou's thought summons us, will – no need to be under any illusions here – stay with us for a long time. Essays presented in this issue, located in a space that we could define as one of

⁴ Cf. on this the "Thirteen These on Politics" published by Badiou on the *The Nouvel Observateur* on September 2, 2022. They are available here at <https://www.nouvelobs.com/idees/20220902.OBS62676/treize-theses-et-quelques-commentaires-sur-la-politique-aujourd-hui-par-alain-badiou.html>. An English translation appeared in *Crisis and Critique*, volume 9, issue 2, 2022.

fidelity to the Badiou event – a fidelity that, as readers will see for themselves, far from being apologetic, is authentically *critical* and *militant* – intend, each in their own way, to contribute to it.

The first two articles included in this issue consider the phase of Badiou's thought that precedes the publication of *Being and the Event*. Both do so without treating that phase as a mere preparation of the mature Badiou, showing, instead, the productivity of reading Badiou's early work on its own terms. **Constanza Filloy's** text, "La dialéctica durante los 'años rojos': la matriz de la escisión y la politicidad de la teoría en Alain Badiou", taking as its starting point the debate emerged after the publication of *Being and the Event* on the relation between structure and history that it would imply (with the notorious criticisms of transcendentalism and "miracle-ism" levelled at him by some), considers the way in which this very relationship is addressed by Badiou in the phase of the so-called *années rouges*. Reconstructing the highly politicised genesis of Badiou's problematic within a conjuncture marked by May '68, in which it was a question, for him, of elaborating a dialectic that would escape both the simplifications of the readings then prevalent (readings based on the concept of alienation, meanwhile subjected to a fierce critique by Althusserianism), and the combinatorial pitfalls of structuralism, Filloy argues that Badiou's Maoist-inflected reading of Hegel leads to a "non-transcendental" approach to the relationship between structure and history from which, in turn, a radically "non-transcendental figure of the subject" emerges. However, if one finds, in this phase of Badiou's thinking, a promising attempt to think of this relationship in an immanent manner, one rooted in an "incandescent" fusion of ontology and politics that was characteristic of the red years, Filloy points out that such an attempt needs to be "supplemented", if it wants to retain its eminently strategic-political force and thus avoid its univocal association with ontology. As the author argues, the dialectic that Badiou bequeaths to us must ultimately be "reopened" in the direction of an "expansive dialectic" capable of incorporating the dimension of the critique of capitalism and the political struggles that currently exist. In this perspective, it can be argued that the early, more dialectical Badiou, is still a valid resource for thinking through some of problems posed in his later philosophy. A similar perspective emerges from the following article, by **Giacomo Clemente**, which also dwells on the early Badiou, focusing on a moment when his closeness to the Althusserianism was at its greatest. In "From Platonic Gesture to Theory of Discourses", Clemente analyses some still unpublished notes that Badiou wrote for an exchange with Althusser, Balibar, Macherey, Duroux, and others, in the framework of a never actually completed collective work that was to be entitled *Elements of Dialectical Materialism*. In this exchange of notes between the members of the group, the aim – as we can now infer from Althusser's posthumously published

texts and some other unpublished notes preserved in the archives – was to elaborate a theory of different types of discourse (scientific, ideological, unconscious, aesthetic and philosophical), their differential effects and their articulation. On the basis of unpublished materials, Clemente’s essay reconstructs Badiou’s theory of “philosophical discourse” and its relationship to scientific discourse, showing how Badiou’s stake in this phase was to demonstrate that between dialectical materialism, as philosophy, and historical materialism, as science, there exists a real speculative relationship that differentiates Marxist philosophy from what Macherey, in other notes, called the philosophies of commencement (the philosophies that entertain with science a relationship of externality, functional to its legitimation). As the author argues, not only does one find here a key document of Badiou’s “Althusserian moment”, but also the emergence of a series of problems that would be recast in the later period as well as valuable insights that can be put to work for a renewed theory of discourses.

With the articles by Osman Nemli and Fiona Hile, the focus begins to shift to the more recent Badiou. The theoretical horizon of both these contributions is the one stretching between the first and second volumes of the trilogy on being and event, i.e., between *Being and the Event* (1988) and *Logic of Worlds* (2006). **Osman Nemli**’s contribution, “Badiou’s Social Ontology: Another Theory of the Subject”, tackles a thorny issue within the reception of Badiou’s philosophy, especially in the Marxist or post-Marxist contexts, namely the question of the space that the “social” occupies within the ontological framework it outlines. Confronting some of the criticisms levelled at Badiou on this point, and acknowledging that the question of the social is underdeveloped in his system, Nemli argues that there are resources in it to work in this direction. The author’s theoretical proposal is thus to “invent” what is already there in Badiou. Consequently, Nemli proposes an engagement with Badiou’s work – in particular, the Badiou of *Logic of Worlds* – strategically based, in particular, on an original and sustained reading of Badiou’s key formula on the distinction between democratic materialism and materialist dialectic: “there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths”. In the perspective elaborated by Nemli, “social ontology”, as it can be extracted/invented from Badiou’s work, “importantly names the vanishing mediator between eternal truths and their historical appearances”, and “answers the knotty question regarding philosophy’s relation to its four conditions and their compossibility”.

Fiona Hile’s contribution, “Lady Chandos and the Humanity Function: Badiou, Lacan, Coetzee”, addresses Badiou’s conception of love, a topic of intense interest stretch to taking into consideration in its own right and insofar as it concerns one of the four truth procedures that Badiou’s philosophical discourse acknowledges – the others being science, arts, and politics. More specifically, the paper focuses on Badiou’s reconfiguration of the feminine position, drawing

mostly on Badiou's 1991 essay *What is Love?* and, within this, on the postscript, titled "The Feminine Position and Humanity". Badiou's postscript confronts directly Lacan's views on the topic; Hile takes a somewhat different route by further summoning to the scene another postscript, Coetzee's "Letter of Elizabeth, Lady Chandos", which ends his 2003 novel *Elizabeth Costello*, and which in turn echoes Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *The Letter of Lord Chandos*. Through this move, Hile originally attempts to illustrate the claim that the woman position is that which knots the four types of truth procedures together.

The last two papers in this collection, "The Speculative Strategy. On the ontological and meta-ontological question in Badiou's Philosophy", by J-P. Grasset, and "A Footnote on Alain Badiou's Critique of Plato's *Sophist*", by Keylor M. Moya, both deal with the last stage of Badiou's philosophical work on being and event, considering the developments of the conceptual architecture of Badiou's system in *The Immanence of Truths* (of which the English translation came out while this issue was in preparation). In his contribution, **J.-P. Grasset** argues that the idea of a "speculative strategy" (the title of the first section of *The Immanence of Truths*) should not be read as a mere title, but as a third stage in Badiou's overall project of a philosophy of the event, one that not only adds to, but radicalises, the theoretical results of the previous stages, the Platonism of the multiple and the communism of the idea. According to Grasset's perspective, this stage further specifies the role of mathematics within its ontology and the question of truth in reference to the finitude controversy, so central to the contemporary philosophical landscape and, of course, negatively, to the entire Badiouan philosophical enterprise after *Being and Event*. Thanks to its insights, Grasset's contribution makes it possible to develop, in the light of the totality of Badiou's system (at least at its current, supposedly definitive, stage), a reading perspective that also sheds new light on the previous phases of Badiou's systematic philosophy and on the meaning of its main concepts. On a more circumscribed issue, but one of great theoretical importance, **K.M. Moya** dwells in the article that closes the issue, "A Footnote on Alain Badiou's Critique of Plato's *Sophist*". Under the cautionary modesty of the title, Moya takes issue with Badiou's reading of Plato's *Sophist* in the introductory part of the second book of *Logic of Worlds*. The point at stake is whether Badiou, having credited Plato with "the first transcendental inquiry in the history of thought culminating with the introduction in the *Sophist* of the idea of the Other", which allows us to think that non-being can appear, does justice to Plato in claiming that "he says nothing about the way this appearance is effective."⁵ According to Moya, Badiou does not do justice to Plato, for the latter does indeed offer an example of the appearance of non-being, and this is by means of the concept of *phantasma*, carefully to be distinguished from the

⁵ Both quotations are from Alain Badiou, *Logic of Worlds*, London : Continuum, 2009, respectively at p. 63 and p. 64.

concept of *phantasia*. But Moya's paper delivers much more than this, since it goes on to reflect on the bearings that the peculiar "logic" of phantasma might have – and sometimes already has – with respect to crucial junctures of Badiou's thought as this is developed in all three works of his speculative trilogy.