

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ALAIN BADIOU, *The Century*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007 (English Translation), xiv + 225 p., index.

These days, it seems as though we have no choice but to accept reality as it is given. In this age of neoliberalism, which seeks to preserve human rights at all costs, leaving all else to the invisible hand of the market, the experiments of the preceding century have all been rendered “unthinkable.” In this sense, Margaret Thatcher stood as a harbinger of the new millennium with her proclamation: “There is no alternative.” The horrific memory of two world wars, the attempted extermination of the European Jews, and the descent of political revolution into totalitarian nightmare invokes trauma, in which “politics turns into tragedy,” an expression of barbarism that should rightfully be forgotten. In this context, Alain Badiou’s recent book, *The Century*, attempts to make the twentieth century “thinkable” again, because, in spite of all its shortcomings, its sheer violence and totalitarianism, the century pursued a vital political project for the creation of a “new man.”

No mere philosopher of the millennium, Badiou achieved prominence in France through the 1980s for his introduction of “the event” as a key concept in rethinking subjectivity. However, he would only become widely recognized among English readers with the translation of his work beginning in 1999, when he took on Deleuze in debating the nature of multiplicity. Against the apparently “univocal” conception of life put forward by Deleuze, in which events are expressions of a singular vital impulse, for Badiou, an event marks a rupture in ontology, driving the subject to produce his or her own truth through what he describes as “truth procedures.” In his study of the twentieth century, Badiou develops this argument further, examining how “the century” itself “thought its own thought.” While his previous work has been quite polemical, this series of lectures, delivered at the Collège International de Philosophie from 1998 to 2001, circles around a number of provocative themes in a more exploratory manner. Through the course of his discussion Badiou introduces a series of questions that challenge the way in which social scientists conventionally view ideology, historicity, and social formation.

As the melange of theories loosely described as “postmodernism” reaches the point of exhaustion, Badiou is part of a generation of scholars that have returned to figures such as Sartre, Breton, Lenin, Mao, and Freud for theoretical insight. Rather than deriding them for their failure to escape the overarching metanarratives of the modern era, Badiou seeks to capture the

internal dynamic that drives their thinking. Undertaking a review of the preceding century as a philosopher, his focus is not on the century as a historical period; on the contrary, he ambitiously seeks to examine how the century has come to be “subjectivated,” aiming to “stick as closely as possible to the subjectivities of the century” (5). Adopting a position of “maximal interiority,” he argues that the very notion of “the century” only becomes thinkable as countless figures come to speak of it as an unprecedented epoch, destroying all that is ancient and culminating in a new beginning. The century is imbued with a vital spirit.

Far from being a “century of ideologies,” the twentieth century is characterized by a “passion for the real,” for “what is immediately practicable, here and now” (58). Motivated by a drive to move beyond mere representations, a drive powerfully expressed by Nietzsche and by Bergson early in the century, the passion for the real unveils the real power of the subjective will. This conception is radically different from the nineteenth century positivist notion that social facts are external to the individual, divorced from subjective desires and confronted as external constraints. Drawing on Lacan, Badiou argues that the passion for the “real” is by no means limited to that which already exists out there in the world, but includes a certainty that the subjective will “can realize, in the world, unheard-of-possibilities; that very far from being a powerless fiction, the will intimately touches on the real” (99). While this provides a central theme through the course of the book, it is only tentatively scratched at, and it remains difficult to tease out the broader dimensions of this concept as the book unfolds. A familiarity with Badiou’s earlier work could be helpful in framing the larger argument.

Developing his argument through a very partial analysis of several key texts, poems, and pieces of art, the strength of this book is in Badiou’s ability to attribute a rich texture to the century. For instance in his examination of a 1923 poem by Osip Mandelstam, Badiou powerfully exhibits how “the century” took on the shape of a beast, full of life and vitality but at the same time gushing out blood and death; the century was in ruins before it had even been born. Badiou (17) goes on to show that this poem illustrates how the twentieth century “generates an entirely new configuration of the relation between end and beginning.” The century’s subjectivity is placed under the “paradigm of definitive war,” which stages a “non-dialectical confrontation between destruction and foundation, for the sake of which it thinks both totality and the slightest of its fragments in the image of antagonism” (39).

This figure of irreconcilable antagonism is deeply embedded in the century’s image of itself, reflecting the ongoing pursuit of the real. Badiou shows how this has been expressed in the century’s art which seeks to reflexively expose the conditions of its own creation, oftentimes destroying the work of art in the process. But with no clear-cut way of measuring the truth constituted by an act of subjective will, the long march to expose the real becomes a ceaseless advance, a gap that is constantly reopened. This explains the drive by twentieth-century figures, such as revolutionary

parties and avant-garde art collectives, to periodically destroy their own masks in elaborate purging rituals. By expunging the “counter-revolutionary” elements from their ranks they are able to maintain contact with the real, re-establishing the conditions for their radical break with the past. The strength of this book is in exposing the manner in which this dynamic unfolds, which is the source of much of the century’s violence, Badiou argues.

By adopting a perspective of “maximal interiority,” the scope of “the century” is at times unclear and the reader is left to question to what extent this image can be extended to include the thoughts and feelings of those residing beyond the boundaries of a revolutionary cadre. But perhaps this is the point, as the agent of change is not so much the human actors themselves, but rather the inertia experienced by those attempting to infuse the century with a model of the new man. The search for sustained contact with the real is constantly threatened with retreat into collective identity. For Badiou (97), this is the real question that the century posed but failed to answer: “How are we to move from the fraternal ‘we’ of the epic to the disparate ‘we’ of togetherness, of the set, without ever giving up on the demand that there be a ‘we?’” The drive to constitute a “new man” confronted that which escaped formalization under existing political projects as an ever-present adversary culminating in the crystallization of exclusionary collective identities. However, there is also a “we” which “includes the difference in itself, a together which harbours alterity.” This has largely been forgotten in the current retreat to individualism, which eschews all forms of collective subjectivity.

This is the question which Badiou leaves us with, providing only a glimpse of a response in the Postface where he outlines a theory of what he calls formalized in-humanism. Here, he fruitfully contrasts the radical humanism of Sartre, undertaking a philosophy of praxis focused on the development of man in a manner that expunges all a priori assumptions, with the anti-humanism of Foucault, proclaiming the death of man in order to open the possibility of thought. Rather than signifying the retreat from a formal political project, Badiou argues, it is only in the inhuman that we can begin to envisage the creation of new political forms. This reconceptualization of social change provides a useful starting point for social scientists who all too often reify social forms by entrenching political strategies in an always already determined social ontology.

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