

Anti-Badiou

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Anti-Badiou

On the Introduction of Maoism
into Philosophy

François Laruelle

Translated by *Robin Mackay*



B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

BM0682782

Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

175 Fifth Avenue
New York
NY 10010
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

Originally published in French as *Anti-Badiou: Sur l'introduction du maoïsme dans la philosophie* © Éditions Kimé, 2011

This English translation © Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4411-9574-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Laruelle, François.

Anti-Badiou: on the introduction of Maoism into philosophy / François Laruelle; translated by Robin Mackay. First [edition]. pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4411-9574-6 (hardcover) – ISBN 978-1-4411-5870-3 (epub)

– ISBN 978-1-4411-9076-5 (ebook (pdf)) 1. Badiou, Alain–Criticism and interpretation. 2. Badiou, Alain–Political and social views. 3. Communism.

4. Philosophy, French–20th century. I. Mackay, Robin (Philosopher), translator. II. Title.

B2430.B274.L3713 2013

194–dc23

2012021338

Typeset by Fakenham Prepress Solutions, Fakenham, Norfolk NR21 8NN

Printed and bound in India



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Abbreviations

FP	Forces of Production
K	Kant
F	Fichte
NP	Non-Philosophy
OV	Ontology of the Void
PSM	Principle of Sufficient Mathematics
PSP	Principle of Sufficient Philosophy
RP	Relations of Production



Preface

Re-educating philosophy through mathematics: Purification and terror

Why Badiou? He represents the introduction of Maoism into philosophy, as undertaken by a “great” philosopher—that is to say, a philosopher entirely apart—with all the inherent risk of this will and this greatness. He is an apogee of the modern tradition of philosophy, of its very essence brandished like a standard in the face of mathematics and with its aid. But, beneath this objective appearance, other stakes can be discerned. It would render Badiou banal to describe him merely as a master of “Western” modernity. His project is more profound: his intention is to “re-educate” philosophy. Beyond the various proclamations and summations—which we shall not rely on to prove our point at the level of the most obvious principles—he pursues *the project of the re-education of philosophy through mathematics, and not at all that of the constitution of a mathematically based science of philosophy (supposing such a thing were possible)*. This enterprise has no equivalent in the history of philosophy (except perhaps

Plato); but it does have a political model, in the recent history of communism. Badiou would have it that “modernity” is a fusion of Platonist mathematicism and Maoism, thus demonstrating his astonishing plasticity, his ability to fuse with liberalism on one hand, mathematicism on the other. From this point of view, mathematicism is the condition of communism, with the authoritarian Platonist model finding a new lease of life in Maoism.

Although at first glance the characteristically conservative aspect of all philosophy prevails in Badiou, in fact he cedes nothing to the dominant tradition of philosophy, above all “continental” and “modern” philosophy. He practices mathematics to teach and to teach himself, at best to illustrate the concept; a matter of apprenticeship, of the deciphering of a constituted science about which and through which philosophy can educate itself. But to the best of our knowledge, it is not a matter of actual mathematical production, as in Plato and a few rare so-called “modern” classics. Here, the philosopher of mathematics remains a philosopher, and not a mathematician. That is to say that, if there is no chance here of producing a real breakthrough “in mathematics” (something that, of course, we do not expect of him), there is also no chance of exceeding the limits of philosophy. With Badiou, philosophy remains well within the bounds of its traditional relations—French rather than Anglo-Saxon—and those of its history. Even the mathematics and logic that he introduces as conditions for philosophy, he considers under the authority of history, referring to them principally as historical formations. Whence his obsession with

the “modern”—which, far from delivering itself from history, enchains and immobilizes itself within history. He dedicates himself once more to the reading of texts—in this case the mathematical text, but only insofar as it belongs to a ready-made history. After the reading of philosophical texts (Derrida), of Marxist texts on history (Althusser), of Freud (Lacan) and then of the Human Sciences (Foucault), the interpretation of great mathematical texts is invited to take up the baton. It is decidedly the case that here, philosophy (and in particular, French philosophy) falls back into its habitual, pusillanimous mistakes, refusing to experiment with philosophy itself in its being, rather than just its objects, languages and intra-philosophical becomings. This philosophical immobilization by way of history (as obligatory as ever, if often denied) is consummated, paradoxically, in a philosophy “without history” (Althusser and Badiou). A philosophy that ends up as a lazy queen, who hitches her carriage up to a pack of scientists, and can only get going by riding in the wake of the history of sciences. Accepting the need to reform itself, without making any attempt to reinvent itself, *it essentially re-acts to the sciences without acting, properly speaking, upon them—any more than it acts upon itself. What little action it has is limited to a reaction, to varying its style and changing one or another of its forms, without abandoning its most traditional objectives, which are those of a superior authority, sometimes legislative, always imperial.*

But onto this traditional manner, Badiou grafts another intention which is his own proper mark, neither a mere hermeneutic nor a true invention: *the re-education of philosophy—a*

concept that, for Badiou, has a globally political destiny. Education and self-education take place through philosophy; but re-education is a political action carried out upon philosophy itself. And it is carried out in the form of a *pure mathematical rectification* [redressement], not to say a *breaking-in* [re-dressage]. For here, the Cultural Revolution is no “circumstantial” topic for intellectual debate, but a theoretical model that can be read transparently even in Badiou’s most theoretical program. Up until Badiou, philosophy was educative and pedagogical; with him, it is re-educated by mathematics. And rather than an invention, re-education is a particular type of *repetition*; one that seeks to modify everything while conserving for it the destination and the ends of philosophy. Here is the secret and the justification of the initial (if exorbitant) cut between ontology and philosophy—a cultural “matricide” with which Badiou-thought begins. Is this not a new, Maoist, avatar of universal *Aufhebung*, a manner of conserving philosophy through its re-education by means of dismemberment, redistribution and subtraction? The old duality surpassing/conserving is now relayed by conservation/re-education. Philosophy will be forced out of itself, will be forced to send its intellectuals to the narrowest and harshest of schools. But this is still a way of conserving, in all essential respects, its privileges.

This mathematical (and more secretly, political and “cultural”) program is of the greatest interest to what we call “non-philosophy.” Non-philosophy, which seeks a way of depotentializing philosophy and making another use of it, but via other, more positive and less authoritarian procedures—formerly on the

“non-Euclidean” model, and at present through a scientific (physical) experimentation and performance of philosophy—not at all through a scholarly and “cultural” breaking-in. There are certain philosophers who dream of a new school, a new discipline, whether it be that of phenomenological description (Husserl), applied physical rationalism (Bachelard), the logical analysis of ordinary language (Analytic philosophy)... and now, that of the forced re-education of new intellectual cadres, who will govern through mathematics. These new cadres directing thought can only be philosophers—as we might have expected, ever since Plato. The re-education of philosophy conserves of the latter only its formal authority of doctrine and direction, its most authoritarian and most perennial aspect. It makes use of mathematics, and then logic, only as pedagogical disciplines safeguarding the correct image of thought—a project that some would not hesitate to call a bootcamp. We oppose to it a “non-” philosophy that conserves philosophy only qua “non-standard,” in its effective methods and in the malleability of its materiality, entrusting new tasks—this time of invention—to the co-operation of physics and philosophy, rather than to the mathematical razor.

Whether it constitutes a new relation to philosophy or not, we must keep in mind this manner of treating the subject, in order to comprehend how non-philosophy—which, for its part, does not contemplate philosophy, but practices it otherwise, within a new, more experimental thought—can be interested in, but at the same time very much opposed to, a project like Badiou’s. This project is bound to seem to it a half-solution,

with all the drawbacks of every half-solution that hesitates to liquidate philosophical sufficiency, and is content merely to introduce a deviation into its classical objects—a kind of mathematical, rather than textual, deconstruction. Badiou ultimately re-normalizes that which, in his program, could have been “revolutionary,” in the sense of Marx’s oxymoronic “revolutionary science.” He contents himself once more with a “revolutionary philosophy,” a “cultural” revolution within the limits of philosophy, rather than a scientific and non-philosophical revolution *in* philosophy.

He achieves this at the price of what can only be called a pitiless purification and a philosophical voiding, neither of which are limited to his political declarations alone. Both as a result of the technical mathematical means and for political ends, he conflates the science of philosophy with the purification of philosophy. We shall discover the theoretical apparatus of this conflation in a total planification¹ that takes place as in a mirror, and through a certain torsion—specularity being the only means by which the void may act. An attempt to re-establish the supposedly original purity of philosophy, its correctness or its “line,” after so many postmodern contortions, it is also a vast operation of the purification of philosophy, wherein the latter is reduced to its two major Platonic knowledges, convoked for a specular confrontation. We shall not be content here with alluding to Badiou’s eulogy to emancipatory terror (or any number of other violent enunciations), so as to berate or make fun of them shallow-mindedly—with each philosopher accusing the other, banally, of terrorism. For he alone has

had the courage to openly advocate it, to have assertively and consciously combined the conceptuality of Western philosophy with Maoism. The entire system, in its “metaphysical” depths, in its ultimate axioms, can be read as a manifesto of terror or of “cultural revolution” in philosophy. A terror with a twofold effect, consisting firstly in the putting-to-work of ontology, the major occupation of most “philosophers,” which is now to be torn from the authority of philosophy and re-educated by mathematics; and subsequently in the return of philosophy as official Doctrine of Truth. Such a project can exercise a profound seduction over dogmatic minds, those exhausted by the apparent superficiality of the postmoderns, or those cynically celebratory of the excesses to which such a re-education might lead—we speak of this seduction “in full knowledge of the facts.” But once this seduction has passed, are we obliged to return, head bowed, to the old humanist nostalgias, to liberal modernity—which, let us recognize, occasions a certain disgust not just for Badiou, but for every thinker who is not entirely corrupt? Badiou, also, has reacted to what is intolerable—but too fast and too harshly, with an appeal to the void, and with his own brand of nostalgia. From this misadventure we draw a cautionary principle that we call non-philosophy, but which does not exhaust the latter as science. Can one re-act without ceding too much to the nostalgia of the void? Is the void not the best argument for simply renouncing all action? It would be pleasingly paradoxical to make of Badiou’s philosophy—so well-informed, so well-documented, so hardworking—a lazy philosophy. Of course, we shall not go that far. But it is worth

emphasizing that in Badiou we find the old conjunction of three cults: that of personality (a philosopher of stellar rarity), that of the labor of the masses (as intellectual workers), and that of militant struggle (in the name of truth). That here the cult of personality becomes the cult of master-philosophers, the labor of the masses becomes that of intellectuals, and anti-capitalist militants confront “pétaino-parliamentarianism”—these transferences matter little. Yes, Maoism is a style that makes itself at home in the French context, donning the new clothes of “Badiolism.” But we shall seek elsewhere, in the very principles of this doctrine, that which makes it so menacing. We must rethink non-acting [*non-agir*] in so far as, without re-acting to a conjuncture that demands nothing of us other than to re-act, and for this reason can lead to the void, only non-acting can act upon it.

A purification is always disquieting when we think of what it may have in store for humans. And Badiou’s is so absolute that it is difficult not to feel threatened, despite his abstraction and his irreality. We must change arms, change strategy, oppose him with something other than those objections against “grand” systematic philosophy that were, in their time, Hamann’s “metacritique of the purism of reason” (against Kant), Jacobi’s apology for faith and the immediate (against Fichte), the individual and the instant in Kierkegaard, and real or generic man in Feuerbach and the young Marx (against Hegel). Nonetheless, these objections, each in their time, provided extraordinary armaments for the struggle against adversaries such as rationalism and the dialectic. There is no point in saying that we need a new

“philosophy,” unless we furnish it ourselves; but we must do so by taking the problem from another angle than that of such (often spontaneous and religious) protestations. We firstly need to defend ourselves against philosophical sufficiency by means of a new thought that would not be entirely of the philosophical genre, but without abandoning the philosophical arsenal altogether. A new critique that would not be just one more philosophical “critique” of philosophy, but an entirely other usage of the latter, opposed to its narcissistic auto-glorification and its dominant use of thought. With or without mathematics, in Badiou it is not a question simply of a philosophy of force but of a political practice of philosophy (Lenin) conjugated with the mathematical void, *a practice of the force of the void in all domains of thought, in the name of philosophy*. *Logics of Worlds*² tried to correct this impression, whose danger Badiou sensed—but the correction was carried out by way of exactly the same procedure: by purifying this time the intermediary stage of transcendental Logic, which he adjoins to the edifice whose completion (like a well-ordered table of contents), he believes, will suffice to attenuate the violence.

On the theoretical plane, we must resolve the fairly simple paradox that, in Badiou, the exceeding of classically “philosophical” means by science, art and politics extinguishes the philosophy it exalts; that the permanent defense of philosophy supposes that he purifies it, banalizes it and renders it decidedly meager. And on the more contentious plane of a generic ethics of philosophy, we must invent a defensive strategy that exerts the “force” of an ultimatum, but without violence. How is

an ultimatum possible that is, in a certain sense, weak—a non-victorious force? *Non-standard Philosophy*,³ which this essay accompanies, as the analysis of an at once limited and especially typical example of that which we refuse, proposes a more profound solution to this paradox. How can we oppose Badiou without entering into a mere “relation of forces,” setting against him a force of the same nature as his own? All of these terms (purification, ultimatum, defense) obviously require further precision in order to avoid insoluble misunderstandings. To speak of a defensive ultimatum is strange if one thinks “relations of force” according to the French context (Nietzsche, Foucault, Derrida). But we have learnt to distinguish, on the model of physics (albeit in a very different way) between a “strong force” (that which Badiou intends to introduce into thought) and a “weak force” that we also call “generic”—that is to say, a force proper to humans rather than to Being. In reality, this generic force is not so much itself weak as it is a weakening of the strong force. There are ultimata, possibilities of defense or *last things* in other ways of thinking, and in particular (this is our solution) in a renewed “non-philosophy.” More concretely: to protect philosophy against itself, must we purify it through the entirely specular mediation of mathematics, making of it a superior politico-cultural doxa that exalts mathematics as force of the void (like a kind of philosophical brainwashing)? Or should we rather aim for a scientific-type knowledge of philosophy, a knowledge that would no doubt be contingent, but which, this time, would truly escape such doxa? The spontaneous usage of philosophy involves an exaltation of force, of combat and of war

that stems from certain of its origins, its axioms even, and which it appears to us impossible to reduce to a deviancy, whether this deviancy be a fascizing *objective appearance* as in Nietzsche, explicitly Nazifying as it has very precisely been shown to be in Heidegger, or Maoizing—all three of these consummated always in the condemnation of “democracy.” The introduction of Maoism into philosophy cannot be a conjunctural accident, even if it is also a matter of a certain conjuncture; this would be to underestimate Badiou as a philosopher. No, it is an essential possibility of philosophy, one that philosophy makes available alongside others; a possibility first actualized by Plato, but one that is profoundly inscribed in the very axioms of philosophical decision, albeit more or less inert or apparently inactive at any given time. We require further details as to the new version of non-philosophy, and as to the analytic means that will allow us to detect in Badiou the indestructible residue of philosophy, and its conservation-reeducation by Cantor and Mao under the sign of Plato.



Introduction

What is it to “Badiolise”? Prologue on the centre-stage

I thus propose to exhibit a tautology, to explore its hidden folds along with its manifest self-evidence: *Badiou is (still, more than ever) a philosopher!* Here, all the badiolisers of Paris and beyond burst out laughing: What a great discovery! Badiou, a philosopher? Isn't that what he never stops proclaiming and demanding of his readers—to recognize and contemplate (without making any particular effort other than that of reading) the validity of his doctrine? And it is true: for once, here is an authentic philosopher, all such predicates are welcome; but what renders the formula interesting or problematic is that he is a *philo-rigid* type in a discipline which, itself, is not particularly rigid. Maybe he will hesitate to read me since, after all, I demonstrate, with a certain doggedness that will be deemed futile, that he deserves more than full marks, that he wins the philosopher's grand prize (but does one award a grand prize to a Master?). He may even thank me (and send me on my way)

for having attempted a work of synthetic elucidation of the principles of his work and of his philosophical personality. But all of these signs remain ambiguous. One of the principles of non-philosophy is that it does not at all suffice to call oneself a philosopher, in a more or less well-argued (but always sufficient) manner. This claim must be verified from without by *a science for philosophy* that will unmask not so much the vague and doxic claim of philosophy to be a science, as its narcissistic and specular pretention to be, precisely, a philosophy—and the right one. This will not, then, be a mediocre, critical and *sokalien* scrutiny—he is obviously beyond such things; but rather a quasi-psychoanalysis, making use of means other than the traditional hesitations and ambiguities of the concept of “philosophy” from which he fails to escape. If all my efforts only go to prove that Badiou is “still a philosopher,” it is only insofar as he is not as much of a philosopher as he wishes to be... and that he is, more than he fears. It is thus not simply a matter of announcing what he himself never stops claiming, Philosophy-in-person, the Idea of the Master of thought surrounded by mediocre thinkers. An “Anti-Badiou” may seem to be an act of anti-philosophy, but that would be an overhasty conclusion—it would be to conclude from the paradigm to the essence. It must be agreed that, while non-philosophy has overtones of anti-philosophy, it cannot recognize itself in current anti-philosophy, whose origins are predominantly philosophical, and only secondarily scientific, or are scientific in too positivist a manner.

Take one of Heidegger’s tautologies: the nothing nothings, speech speaks, the world worlds... *Badiou badiolizes?* A not entirely

tautological formula, any more than the proposal that Hegel hegelianizes, or that Bergson bergsonizes. Its true radical extent is brought out by the following observation: *non-philosophy does not philosophize within philosophy, but only by using it*, and this is what allows it to treat apparently self-evident philosophical truths as symptoms. There are many ways of understanding and anatomizing this formula, *Badiou badiolizes*: according to journalistic accounts, media glorification, finally a great philosopher and militant has descended, in person, into the “political” arena. Precisely this point is a crucial question for non-philosophy and for its evaluation of the role of philosophers in their becoming-intellectual. But it seemed of more urgent and broader importance to write an Anti-Badiou than an Anti-Sarkozy—even if the first obviously implies the second. The “Badiou case” is certainly not a merely technical problem. It belongs to a betrayal specific to certain philosophers who, fascinated by the unexpected tandem Plato-Mao, and nourished on the largely justified hatred of liberal humanism, without further ado draw the conclusion that thought must be purified of every destination—I would say, at my own risk and peril (and being on guard against the right even more than the left), of every properly human “pre-” destination. Are we destined for history, for philosophy, for the world, have we been *sent*, probably from further afield than from our individuality, to wage a war in their name?

As one might expect, “Philosophy” [*la philosophie*] is a highly ambiguous expression, as often multiple as it is one. If Badiou is “still” a philosopher, and if this needs to be proved contrary to certain appearances, it is only insofar as we understand it in