

**The Enthusiasm of Political Sequences:
Notes on Sylvain Lazarus's Anthropology of the Name**

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Abstract

In *Anthropology of the Name*, Sylvain Lazarus warns us against subordinating radical political thinking to its relationship with extant social reality. When we attribute thought to historical or social prerequisites which supposedly ‘determine’ it, we deny that thinking can challenge *what already is*. By contrast, radical politics contest the extant and create new social possibilities. For Lazarus, ‘enthusiasm’ is the disposition that accompanies transformational politics. This essay distinguishes Lazarus’ ‘enthusiasm’ from Alain Badiou’s ‘fidelity.’ I argue, contra most English-speaking interpreters, that Lazarus’ theory of politics is a) distinct from Badiou’s and b) better suited for thinking through moments of political resistance.

Keywords

Sylvain Lazarus, Alain Badiou, Political Emotions, Communism, Workers’ Inquiry

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Introduction

In *Anthropology of the Name*, the French anthropologist Sylvain Lazarus levels a far-reaching critique against the “scientistic” methodologies adopted by many contemporary historians and political theorists (Lazarus 2015, 78). More specifically, Lazarus worries that social scientists tend to subordinate political thinking to its relationship with our extant social reality. As he puts it, they demand that thought “hold forth on its requisites” (2015, 52). In other words, social scientists presuppose that thought necessarily *has* requisites that determine what it is; they assume that thinking is merely an expression of a set of pre-given historical or social circumstances that they endeavor to study. But, for Lazarus, the social scientists’ methodological assumption that thought has requisites leaves them with a limited ability to adequately study and understand the thinking that happens during moments of direct contestation against “the existing social and political order of things” (Lazarus 2016, 113). For example, amidst workers’ strikes and uprisings, people often refuse to remain beholden to the way in which bosses, policemen, politicians, and capitalists have already defined their social position. During the strike, people *think otherwise*. Their relationship with the existing historical and social order is one of direct challenge and antagonism. The social scientists’ mistake is to wrongly assume that our thinking in moments of strike, uprising, or revolt remains subordinate to our current social arrangement.

Lazarus’ method of inquiry, which he opposes to the methodology of social scientists, is rooted in the thesis that moments of political contestation are also moments when *people* think. For him, the word “people” is a “certain indistinct” (Lazarus 2015, 61). The statement ‘people think’ asserts that there *is* a group that partakes in the act of thinking, but it doesn’t determine any necessary prerequisites for their thinking. We can assert that people think, without defining in advance who these people are, how many they are, what social and historical situations dictate their thinking, and so on.¹ *People think* is therefore a radically non-conditional statement. Put differently, “in people’s thought, the possible is that by which the real is identified” (Lazarus 2019). As I will go on to show, *enthusiasm* is Lazarus’ name for the courageous, militant disposition that helps us identify those contestational political sequences where people think, and where their thinking leads them to fight on behalf of the possibility of another world. Lazarus maintains that a moment of enthusiastic politics is also a moment where we can see how people’s thought opens up a conflict with the social order that already exists.

Although interest in Lazarus’ work is quickly growing in the English-speaking world, most of his essays are not yet widely available in English.² Thus far, only four texts by Lazarus have been translated: *Anthropology of the Name*, “Can Politics be Thought in Interiority?”, “Worker’s Anthropology and Factory Inquiry”, and “Lenin and the Party”. Three of these four works were translated in the past seven years. The scarcity of available resources for understanding Lazarus has led to a problem in the secondary literature. Namely, most of the interpretations of Lazarus published in English are heavily

reliant upon Alain Badiou's understanding of his project.³ In *Metapolitics*, Badiou argues that "Lazarus' thought does for politics what Lacan has done for love: he organises its disjunctive encounter with history" (Badiou 2005, 54). In this passage, and throughout *Metapolitics*, Badiou implies that Lazarus' theory of politics is essentially parallel to his own (just as Badiou's thinking on love apparently runs parallel with Lacan). Most of Lazarus' English-speaking interpreters have followed Badiou's lead. They read Lazarus primarily as a critical interlocutor who helps clarify and bolster Badiou's views on politics. Granted, it certainly makes sense to draw at least some parallels between Badiou and Lazarus. The pair are frequent political collaborators, and they both intend for their work to throw a "monkey wrench...in the machinery of capital" (Badiou 2012, xxx).⁴ Put less metaphorically, both Lazarus' and Badiou's political writings contest the necessity of our current social reality.

However, Badiou's interpretation of Lazarus fails to note a crucial point of contention: the pair have very different understandings of the 'affect' or 'disposition' that accompanies a militant commitment to fighting the existing social order. Whereas Lazarus writes of people's *enthusiasm* during political sequences, Badiou instead evokes the *fidelity* of political subjects. Lazarus' enthusiasm and Badiou's fidelity diverge from one another in two key respects:

Difference One: Badiou emphasizes that fidelity is a courageous commitment to something "absolutely detached" from our current situation (Badiou 2001, 68). Fidelity is the feeling that allows a political subject to rupture with a given finite situation and to instead live "as an immortal" (Badiou 2009, 505). By contrast, Lazarus links enthusiasm not with immortality, but with possibility. When 'People think' their thinking isn't always defined by an essential disinterestedness or 'detachment' from the extant. To the contrary, political sequences entail an *active, real contestation*. Put differently, moments of enthusiastic politics happen when people open up a conflict with the ruling social order that attests to this order's non-necessity: "another subjectivation is possible" (Lazarus 2016, 119).

Difference Two: when a moment of political resistance ends, Badiou argues that this indicates a 'betrayal' of the subject's fidelity (the end of their commitment to live as an immortal and detach from *what already is*). Put differently, the end of a political sequence is a moment of failure. By contrast, Lazarus writes that even after politics ends, the site where politics took place can remain "an enthusiastic site"—a site saturated with evidence that *thinking happened here* (Lazarus, 2015, ix).

My argument is that Lazarus' distinctive concept of 'enthusiasm' both justifies and clarifies the most unique aspect of his work: his invention of a rigorous methodology for studying the past sites where politics took place.⁵ In order to study the thinking that took place amidst various past political sequences (workers' movements, revolutions, and so on), Lazarus proposes that we conduct anthropological inquiries into the places where politics happened. Lazarus' inquiry is only possible because political enthusiasm isn't characterized by 'detachment' from the extent (per Badiou), but rather by real, active contestation. Put succinctly, Lazarus thinks that politics happens at real sites and

that these sites remain *saturated with enthusiasm* even after a given political sequence has ended. Thus, if English-speaking readers remain overly beholden to Badiou's interpretation of Lazarus, we run the risk of ironing over precisely the theoretical divergences that lead to Lazarus' commitment to anthropological inquiry (rather than, for instance, to philosophy).

My paper is divided into three sections. I began by summarizing Lazarus' theory of how political sequences work before honing in on Lazarus' unique method and fleshing out my precise disagreement with Badiou's interpretation.

Section One discusses the danger of the methodological supposition that 'People do not think.' Lazarus traces out the dangers of this supposition by outlining the specific problems and paradoxes it has caused for prior theories of Marxism.

Section Two demonstrates that Lazarus' concept of enthusiasm allows him to identify moments when radical politics happen without attributing the emergence of politics to an individual, a vanguard party, or a social class. At its root, enthusiasm is always *people's* enthusiasm, rather than the enthusiasm of some specific, determinate group. Of course, Lazarus acknowledges that certain groups, (i.e. workers, peasants, armies, and political organizations) can help nourish political enthusiasm. However, they are never enthusiasm's requisite cause. Thus, in Lazarus' theory of politics, politics does not require a state, a 'vanguard party' or a 'revolutionary class'; although such groups have helped to build enthusiasm in specific political sequences.

Section Three summarizes Lazarus' notion of 'political investigation' or 'inquiry.' It also demonstrates how Lazarus' concept of investigation puts him at odds with Badiou's claim that the end of a political sequence is a moment of failure. Here, and throughout my paper, my aim is not to offer a systematic critique of Badiou's work.⁶ Rather, I point out a significant problem with his interpretation of Lazarus. Again, by conflating Lazarus' theory of politics with his own, Badiou does not give us sufficient resources for understanding why Lazarus studies people's thought via an anthropological method of inquiry. A discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of Lazarus' anthropology will require us to return to some of Lazarus' political concepts (for instance, 'enthusiasm', 'the prescription', 'saturation', and 'the site of politics') and to study these concepts on their own terms.

Section One: To Refute the Statement "People Do Not Think"

The supposition that "people do not think" (a supposition that, for Lazarus, has deep roots in the social sciences) is not just cruel or condescending; more dangerously, this notion denies the possibility that people can wage a real fight against the extant (Lazarus 2015, 54). The scientists and social scientists who maintain that "people do not think" don't always state this claim outright. Instead, Lazarus demonstrates that the statement "people do not think" is implicit in other claims about the determinate conditions that supposedly make thought possible. For example, we should be wary of claims that 'scientists think,' or that 'party leaders think,' or that 'workers think, under conditions of class struggle.' These claims aren't necessarily untrue. However, each of them asserts the existence of thinking only under certain, predetermined conditions (for instance, the

conditions of scientific rationality, or the conditions of political oppression). And yet, again, if thought is rooted in the specific conditions of our current social reality, then it can't open up a conflict with this reality without undermining its own basis.

Let's turn to one example of a situation where social scientists have wrongly and disastrously tried to subordinate people's thinking to the social arrangement that their thinking fought against. As early as 1935, Black American Marxists like W.E.B. Du Bois were already worried that prevailing social scientific methods produced accounts of the fight for Black emancipation that rendered Black workers almost entirely agency-less.⁷ In *Black Reconstruction*, Du Bois argued that Black workers won the civil war via a general strike. For him the strike "was not merely the desire to stop work. It was a strike on a wide basis against the conditions of work" (Du Bois 1992, 67). In other words, this strike not only ended slavery but also posited a very different economic and social order. Rather than continuing to work for the profit of slave owners, the strikers put forth the possibility of a new, "fateful experiment in democracy" (ibid., 715). They wanted a world where they owned land and cultivated it on their own terms. This new organization of work, founded on land-ownership for all, could have led to a worker-centered economy where Black people labor without having the fruits of their labor taken by bosses or capitalists. But virtually all historians of reconstruction failed to account for the Black workers' general strike, even supposedly 'progressive' historians like Charles and Mary Beard. Of course, many of these historians operated under the assumption that Black people were biologically inferior to whites. But many other historians (including the Beards), justified their racist oversight of Black workers' power on *historical* or *sociological* grounds. They began from the supposition that Black people were ignorant and weak due to their abject position in the pre-existing social and economic order.

Lazarus thinks that a set of problematic methodological assumptions very similar to the ones that Du Bois wrote against in 1935 (for example, assumptions that 'people do not think' or, more specifically, 'Black workers do not think') have been endemic to the work of many past Marxist historians and political thinkers. In "Thinking After Classism," Lazarus demonstrates that many of the most prominent European revolutionary theorists of the last two centuries offered conceptualizations of thinking in which thinking is fundamentally rooted in the extant.⁸ Lazarus goes on to identify two different problematic procedures through which previous Marxists have attempted to subordinate people's thinking to the extant social order—*determination* and *operation*:

1. *Determination, or, the dialectic of the objective and the subjective*, was Marx's mistake when it came to conceptualizing the agency of political revolutionaries. Lazarus claims that this mistake begins "with the *Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848" (Lazarus 2016, 119). In the *Manifesto*, and throughout many of his later texts, Marx argues that revolutionary consciousness is directly determined by people's social positioning.⁹ As Lazarus puts it, Marx often maintains that "the totality is the means for a nomination of the subjective" (Lazarus 2015, 93). To rephrase this, Marx attributes the thinking of working people to objective conditions outside of their own subjectivity (for instance, the conditions of their

subjugation and exploitation within factories). Workers are revolutionary *because* of their social class: “The central operator” that determines their consciousness “is clearly class” (2015, 80). However, if we accept that class positioning necessarily determines workers’ capacity for revolutionary thought, then we will not be able to meaningfully come to grips with moments when workers *refute* their class positioning. If class subjugation is necessary for revolutionary thinking, then how can workers problematize their subjugation without undermining the determinate condition that enables their own thinking? Furthermore, we cannot deny that workers *often* contest the extant reality that dominates them. This contestation doesn’t undermine workers – in fact, it can lead to empowering sequences of sustained political action. Thus, Marx’s deterministic view of class consciousness will not even suffice for conceptualizing the revolutionary agency of the industrial workers whose political aims he intends to bolster.

Although I find Lazarus’ critique of Marx to be perhaps a bit embryonic, we can nonetheless see the aspects of Marx’s theory of resistance that Lazarus worries about if we turn, for example, to Marx’s remarks from “The Documents of the First International” on why workers should strike for an eight-hour working day. The purpose of the eight-hour legal limit, Marx writes, is to restore “health,” “physical energies,” and “the possibility of intellectual development, social intercourse . . . and political action” to workers (1993, 78–79). Marx thinks that capitalism (or, at least, the capitalist social order of his own historical period) sows the seeds for its own destruction by concentrating hundreds of thousands of laborers in industrial cities which can serve as centers for strategy and resistance. However, when the law enables a normal working day of 15, 12, or even 10 hours, the working classes lack the time and health to fully organize. Each reduction in the length of the working day is therefore hugely beneficial. In his “Inaugural Address” to the International Workers, Marx writes in praise of the ten-hour work limit enacted by the Factory Bill of 1847. This bill was the product of “30 years’ struggle” by workers in England. In the decade after its passing, English workers saw “immense physical, moral, and intellectual benefits” (ibid.) By fighting for legal reforms like the Factory Bill, workers’ associations can shorten working days, which in turn will bring about a smarter, stronger, and more organized working class. And yet, for Lazarus, Marx’s problematic claim is that workers’ strength and capacity for revolution is directly tied to their social circumstances. First, it was apparently necessary for workers to be proletarianized, so that these workers could arrive at the thought of striking en masse. Then, it will be necessary for workers’ conditions to somewhat improve, so as to allow for ‘the possibility of intellectual development.’ At every step of this process, Marx seems to be suggesting that the workers’ social class determines how they think.

2. *Operation*, or, *the dialectic of the subjective and the objective* was, in turn, Lenin’s mistake when it came to identifying the political power of people’s thought. Lazarus distinguishes *operation* from *determination* by claiming that operation “raises not so much the question of determinations of consciousness as the issue of the possible effects of consciousness on the order of the real” (Lazarus 2015, 92). In contrast with Marx, Lenin refuses to subordinate thinking by studying its supposed “determination” within our current social reality. He refutes

Marx's claim that industrial workers are the 'revolutionary class' par excellence: "In contrast to the Marxist thesis that can be stated as 'Where there are proletarians, there are Communists,' Lenin opposed spontaneous consciousness" (Lazarus 2007, 259). In other words, by shifting from Marx's class consciousness to his own concept of 'spontaneous consciousness,' Lenin is able to maintain that people's thinking does not depend on deterministic conditions outside of thought. Thus, according to Lazarus' interpretation, Lenin's early writings open up the possibility that thinking does not need to hold forth on its requisites.¹⁰ However, although Lenin's concept of spontaneous consciousness marks a significant step toward affirming the thesis that *people think*, Lenin goes on to cast doubt upon spontaneous consciousness' political efficacy. In his view, spontaneous consciousness cannot truly problematize 'the order of the real.' Put differently, Lenin maintains that spontaneous consciousness only becomes capable of resisting our social order once it is organized into a party. For him, "there is no politics that is not organizational, and the word party denotes this" (2007, 255). Thinking is spontaneous, but *political* thinking is organized.

Lazarus' objection to Lenin's 'operational' thinking is that the organized consciousness of the party – just like the consciousness of Marx's industrial workers – is necessarily determined via social positioning. If we wish to attain a count of who does and doesn't qualify for organized consciousness, we will have to resort to an assessment of the conditions that define thinking in our current social order. *Who has had the chance to develop organized consciousness through the proper 'political education'? Who is equipped to lead political movements, and who is not well-positioned for this task?* Questions like these end up smuggling back in the very same demand that thought hold forth on its requisites.

In summary, the problem with both "determination" and "operation" is that both attempt to directly map "intellectuality onto an exterior reality" (Lazarus 2015, 78). To subordinate "intellectuality" to the reality that supposedly determines it is the crux of what Lazarus calls "the pair ideology/science" (Lazarus, 2019). The ideology/science pairing presents us with a false dichotomy that severely inhibits our political thinking. Either we are scientists who define thinking in terms of already-existing reality, or else we have succumbed to 'ideology,' understood here as an irrational flight of fancy away from the real. However, if we assume that our thinking is undefinable except via *what already is*, then we are forced into accepting that the desire for social transformation stands at odds with thinking.

Rather than resigning ourselves to the procedures of determination and operation, we should instead ask, "Is there room for a real that pertains to a non-objectal and non-nominalist thought?" (Lazarus 2015, 63). If naming a revolutionary social class (as Marx does) or a political party (as Lenin does) is both "objectal" and "nominalist," do we have any other options for identifying "real" moments of political contestation? This question leads Lazarus to invent a procedure for naming and understanding political opposition that stands completely at odds with the "definitions" employed by Marx, Lenin, and other social scientists. There are "two approaches to words:" the definitional

approach, and “the other, where there isn’t polysemy but opposition of *prescriptions*” (Lazarus, 2019). In section two, I argue a) that political *prescriptions*, rather than definitions, are Lazarus’ object of study – that is, his tool for naming and understanding the new *possibilities* opened up by political opposition – and b) that “enthusiasm” is the disposition that accompanies our successful deployment of prescriptions.

Section Two: Lazarus’ Enthusiastic Prescriptions

Because political sequences cannot be identified by a requisite condition that explains their existence (i.e. party organization or class consciousness), Lazarus proposes an alternative method for identifying politics: we know that politics is taking place when we encounter “an enthusiastic site” (Lazarus 2015, ix).¹¹ In “Can Politics Be Thought In Interiority?”, Lazarus argues that Mao Zedong’s unique insight into politics was that we can identify political transformations without relying upon *operation* or *determination*. Rather than naming a revolutionary class or a vanguard party, Mao wrote that revolution in China was identifiable via widespread “enthusiasm for socialism”:

this strictly Maoist category...makes history disappear... Enthusiasm for socialism is not (only) that of a “radiant future,” but a singular theory of development (here, a term that is in no way economic), registered from now on in the forms taken by the army: not only military force, but practicing the work of the masses, which is obligatory.... The most general principle which interests us, having to do with development, is the following: “the new is created in the struggle against the old.” (Lazarus 2016, 124).

In this passage, Lazarus counterposes “enthusiasm for socialism” with “history.” History is a “theory of development” in which any conceivable “radiant future” must *depend upon* the old. Mao, by contrast, puts forth a theory of development via contestation, where “the new is created in the struggle against the old.” Put differently, enthusiastic moments are times when we oppose what already is with “what could be” (Lazarus 2019).¹² Because Maoism is characterized by this struggle, Lazarus describes Maoist politics as a “dialectical” sequence of politics (Lazarus 2016, 119). On Lazarus’ terms, “enthusiasm for socialism” is the name for a mode of politics where people challenge the extant and, in so doing, hypothesize that “another subjectivation is possible” (2016, 119). Furthermore, enthusiasm (understood as a Maoist category) reverses the Leninist understanding of a vanguard party that leads the masses’ revolution and dictates their politics. The army does not *politicize* the masses; rather it carries out work on their behalf: “The army practices the work of the masses, it nourishes enthusiasm for socialism” (2016, 125). This is why Lazarus goes on to describe the dialectical mode of politics as a “people’s war” (2016, 126–127). Enthusiasm predates the army: it is *people* who are enthusiastic, and the people’s army simply nourishes this enthusiasm. Thus, a close reading of Lazarus’ discussion of Maoism in “Can Politics be Thought in Interiority?” reveals two claims not only about the nature of “enthusiasm for socialism,” but also about the nature of enthusiasm, more generally:

Claim One: Enthusiasm is always enthusiasm *for possibility* – it emerges in moments when the possible struggles against the extant. Put differently, enthusiasm

is linked with *prescriptions*, rather than *definitions*.

Claim Two: Enthusiasm is always the enthusiasm *of people*. Determinate groups (i.e. armies, classes, and parties) can sometimes “nourish” enthusiasm, but they are never enthusiasm’s sole source.¹³

To expand on these claims, enthusiasm is nourished via *prescriptions* precisely because prescriptions allow people to challenge the existing social order on behalf of possibility (Lazarus 2015, 7). Whereas definitions rely on *what already is*, prescriptions identify real possibilities for challenging *what is* in favor of *what could be*. As Lazarus puts it, prescriptions name the possibility of “a real other than the objectal, one that could be constituted through inquiry, forming a new field of knowledge and not a scientific system” (Lazarus 2015, 62). Prescriptions don’t ‘get us away’ from the real. Rather, they allow us to challenge one “order of the real” and evoke another possible subjectivation – “a new field of knowledge.” In “Worker’s Anthropology,” Lazarus turns to an analysis of the French auto worker strikes of the early 1980s in order to provide an example of how political prescriptions can help us enthusiastically oppose the definitions that are circulated by bosses, politicians, journalists, policemen, and other functionaries of the ruling order.¹⁴ Lazarus describes the early ‘80s as a time of massive layoffs in the French auto industry. Amidst these layoffs, workers at various factories rose up to dispute both the “amount of severance pay” that they were receiving and “the logic of its calculation” (Lazarus 2019). The workers knew that the “calculation” of their severance package was problematic: bosses and government officials insisted that many of the individuals working in the factory were not workers, but ‘foreigners.’ By using terms like “Shi’ite” and “immigrant” to describe the people laboring in the factories, the bosses and politicians “made the figure of the worker completely disappear” (ibid.). This reduced the number of workers who were eligible for severance package. On Lazarus’ terms, the bosses and politicians used the words ‘worker’ and ‘foreigner’ in a definitional manner. These names purported merely *to describe* extant social reality. Their usage legitimated the decision-making processes of the current ruling order – namely, the bosses’ approach to counting workers. The workers struck back against their bosses with a radically different naming procedure: “*It is the worker who counts the worker, it is not the boss, severance for all*” (ibid.). In other words, the bosses’ approach to counting workers is an illegitimate procedure, and so we must oppose it. “Severance for all” is a call for material improvements in the lives of workers, but it is also a hypothesis concerning the possibility of a different social order, one where “it is the worker who counts the worker.”

By deploying enthusiastic prescriptions, the workers’ aim is not to replace their bosses as the ones who exclude and include particular individuals from the definition of ‘worker.’ The workers’ account of who does and doesn’t count as a worker is intentionally broad and indeterminate: “severance for all.” As Lazarus puts it, an enthusiastic prescription is less like “a demand,” and more like “a thesis, a principle” (Lazarus 2019). The workers, in issuing their prescription, do not demand to be the ones who determine who does and does not count as a worker (otherwise, they would need to issue specific, definitional criteria for what a worker is). Instead, the workers’ prescriptions are aimed at disputing the legitimacy of the “worker/boss” relation: the workers challenge

the process whereby the status and value of the workers is counted by an external group of bosses. In order to carry out this dispute, they offer the “thesis” of another “order of the real” – one where workers can refuse to be counted and valued by an external authority.

If definitions subordinate thinking to “an exterior reality,” prescriptions completely reverse the relationship between the real and thought: thought acts upon the real, and not vice versa. As Lazarus puts it:

In the discursive [viz. definitional] process, the real, understood starting from what is, is unique. In our process of an anthropology of thought, the possible opens a conflict of prescriptions (there are many possibles) and every prescription supports a distinct order of the real (Lazarus 2019).

Definitions subjugate the *singularity* of people’s thought – they make it seem as though a multiplicity of thoughts can be explained via a single, unimpeachable reality. By contrast, prescriptions only work in moments when thought is singular and irreducible, and when it opens up a multitude of different possible realities. Thus, enthusiastic prescriptions are both political and oppositional, insofar as they refuse to conflate “the real” with whatever current social order supposedly ‘governs’ our thinking.

My claim is that Lazarus’ notions of ‘enthusiasm’ and ‘the prescription’ break with Badiou’s seemingly similar notion of fidelity to a greater extent than Badiou’s interpretation of Lazarus acknowledges. Indeed, Badiou fails to note the distinctive character of the ‘enthusiastic prescriptions’ that Lazarus views as necessary for politics. On the one hand, Badiou uses the concept of ‘enthusiasm’ in some of his more recent work on politics, and one could argue that he inherits this concept from Lazarus. For example, in both *Logic of Worlds* and *Métaphysique du bonheur réel*, Badiou writes that political subjects who maintain fidelity are rewarded with a feeling of *enthusiasm* (See Badiou 2015, 40 and 2009, 76). However, on the other hand, these descriptions make it sound like enthusiasm is simply one component of the experience of what Badiou calls ‘political fidelity,’ as though these political dispositions are entirely commensurable with one another.

Badiou defines fidelity thusly: “fidelity...amounts to a sustained investigation of the situation, under the imperative of the event itself; it is an imminent and continuing break” (Badiou 2001, 67). The ‘event itself,’ for Badiou, is a “hazardous” brief moment where *something* flashes before our eyes that allows us to distance ourselves from the situation in which we find ourselves (2001, 67). The political subject has a continuing fidelity to this event, even once it has vanished; just as a fidelitous Christian harbors a continuous commitment to a God beyond this world, so too the fidelitous subject tries to distance itself from its “ephemeral” situation (2001, 70). Put differently, because the event breaks with a given social situation, the fidelitous subject must become essentially “disinterested” in this situation (2001, 69). Our disinterestedness in the situation, paired with our spirited commitment to the hazardous event, allows us to punch “a ‘hole’ in knowledges” and produce “new knowledges” (2001, 70).

Badiou mistakenly conflates Lazarus’ idea that politics happens via political enthusiasm with his own notion of politics via fidelity. We can see this mistake clearly

in a passage from *Metapolitics* where Badiou claims that Lazarus' statement 'people think' is intended to ascribe to people's political thinking a certain 'immortality' or 'eternity.'

[People's thought, as defined by Lazarus] is thinkable, as a precarious singularity restricted by dates... and as indifferent to time. To think a singularity does indeed determine it, in the words of Thucydides, in the guise of an 'eternal acquisition' (Badiou 2005, 38).

Here, Badiou acknowledges that people's thought is situated within time. After all, people's thought is "a precarious singularity restricted by dates" – we can accurately speak of people's thinking *during Maoism*, or people's thinking *amidst the autostikes*. However, Badiou tries to argue that people's thought is, in a far more important sense, also "indifferent to time." Remember: Badiou thinks that the fidelitous subject no longer desires to *live within* their finite, ephemeral, social situation. This is what Badiou means when he writes that the fidelitous subject lives "as an immortal" (Badiou 2009, 505). Under Badiou's interpretation of Lazarus, when people think, their fidelitous thinking is indifferent to time. Because something matters *more* to people than the ruling social order, they can challenge the legitimacy of this order, even if this puts their prior way of life at risk. Badiou argues that Lazarus' statement 'people think' is simply another way of theorizing the immortality of the political subject.

In order to conflate Lazarus' theory of politics with his own, Badiou makes two strong interpretative claims about Lazarus' statement that people think. The first of these claims is true, but I argue that the second one is clearly false:

Badiou's First Claim: Badiou correctly claims that "at the heart of [Lazarus'] thought one finds a de-temporalization of the possible." Put differently, to assert that people think is to claim that thought is sometimes *in excess* of temporalization – we can't necessarily understand thinking by reducing it to the time when it took place. If possibilities could always be identified via time, then the real possibilities opened up by people's thinking would be restricted to the determination of their time period. Badiou is absolutely correct that this is precisely the form of 'determination' that Lazarus' theory of politics tries to avoid.

Badiou's Second Claim: However, Badiou subsequently claims that, because people's thinking *can't necessarily be reduced* to the time when it took place, this means that people's thought is necessarily *indifferent* to time: "to think singularity does indeed *determine* it...in the *guise* of an eternal acquisition" (Badiou 2005, 38, emphasis mine). In Badiou's interpretation of Lazarus, people can only think if they are disinterested in their temporalized social situation, and interested in something entirely outside of time. This interpretation would unify Lazarus' enthusiastic people with Badiou's subject – both 'people' and the fidelitous subject strive to live as an immortal. However, this second claim must be a misunderstanding of Lazarus, because it demands that we place a requisite condition on people's thought (namely, thought *must be* eternal, and not temporal).

In summary, Badiou's first claim is true, for people's thought is *not necessarily* temporal. However, Badiou's second claim is false, for people's thought is also *not necessarily* eternal. Again, what is truly unique about Lazarus' theory of politics is his rigorous refusal to name a requisite condition for thinking. Badiou's interpretation of Lazarus misses this essential point.

We can see the distinction between Badiou's *fidelity* and Lazarus' *enthusiasm* even more clearly if we try to actually apply the concept of fidelity to the enthusiastic factory strikes that Lazarus studies in "Worker's Anthropology." The striking factory workers do not seem to be acting as a fidelitous subject. When these workers opposed their bosses, they were clearly very concerned with their own material interests within the immediate social order ('severance for all'). Of course, the workers' interest was not *limited* to questions about the "amount of severance pay and the logic of its calculation." Again, their strike also poses fundamental challenges to the "boss/worker relation in this kind of situation" (Lazarus 2019). But to deny that these workers are quite directly and importantly concerned with improving their well-being within their immediate social situation would be absurd.

If fidelity is characterized by a "disinterested interest," the factory workers' enthusiasm is by contrast a form of *dual interestedness* (Badiou 2001, 49). As Lazarus puts it, "prescription, while not excluding that it can be factualized, materialized, or put to work, identifies itself essentially as an intellectuality, that is to say, as a thesis" (Lazarus 2019). When we are enthusiastic, our interest is always double. We are interested in *contesting* material reality, but we are also interested in how this contestation helps us *affirm* the thesis of another possible subjectivation. Thus, enthusiasm does not allow us to subordinate people's thinking to either temporal phenomena or to the eternal. This means that, on Lazarus' terms, it is not wrong to describe enthusiasm as 'enthusiasm for socialism,' 'enthusiasm for severance,' or 'enthusiasm for the army'. These phrases each describe different procedures through which enthusiastic prescriptions are "factualized, materialized, or put to work." As Lazarus goes on to write, "A mode in interiority can be identified (we can know its nature) by looking for what thought has been opened up in the world" (Lazarus 2016, 112). As I will elaborate in Section Three, we can find evidence of the thought that "has been opened up in the world" by looking to the particular sites where past political sequences happened.

Section Three: Lazarus' Inquiry

Lazarus' notions of 'enthusiasm' and 'the prescription' give him the conceptual resources to consistently identify and understand past moments of political opposition. Put differently, these concepts justify and clarify his decision to create a rigorous methodology for studying political sequences. Lazarus has a number of different names for the method that he develops: "anthropology of the name," "inquiry," and "political investigation" are three of the most common ones (Lazarus 2019). I want to conclude by underscoring that Lazarus' conception of inquiry is one of the most unique and crucial dimensions of his project.¹⁵ In the "Preface to the English Edition" of *Anthropology of the Name*, Lazarus writes that he intends to nourish enthusiasm "about thought when it is possible to say

how it is at work when it is at work” (Lazarus 2015, 9). The inquirer’s primary task is to identify sites where political contestation took place, and to show how thought was “at work” in these sites. By identifying these places, the inquirer herself becomes a figure of contestation. She opposes herself to those historians and social scientists who, when they maintain that ‘People do not think,’ make thought itself disappear. As Lazarus puts it, “deciding as to the existence of the word – thus forbidding its disappearance, subjectivating it as what permits a transformation in consciousness of those who pronounce it – is exactly what I mean by *people think*” (Lazarus 2016, 111). The inquirer, who does not live amidst a political sequence, may not be in a position to effect a transformation in consciousness. Nonetheless, by returning to sites where politics happened, the inquirer forbids the “disappearance” of the prescriptions that took place at that site.

Political Sequences

Inquiry is an anthropological procedure (rather than a philosophical one) because it studies a given political sequence by returning to the real sites where politics happened. Sites are necessary for politics because “thought is a relation of the real” (Lazarus 2015, 53). If thought were not at work in some actual site, then it would not be capable of supporting the *real possibility* of a *what can be* that stands opposed to a *what already is*. For instance, factory strikes are effective because “there is circulation followed by evacuation of the word ‘worker’ if it is not paired with the category of the factory” (2015, 153). Here, Lazarus does not mean to suggest that the factory dictates the workers’ thinking, but rather that the workers *use* the factory as a site of opposition. The workers make the factory into a place where they can problematize the state’s “circulation” and “evacuation” of the word “worker.” When she studies the factory, the inquirer opposes the subordination of thought to the real by identifying the specific location where a “singular thought” had real effects on the world (Lazarus 2019).

In studying a site of politics, the inquirer affirms the possible by locating evidence of what Lazarus calls “saturation” (Lazarus 2015, ix). The word ‘saturated’ has a double meaning: it means both ‘to be used up’ and ‘to leave behind evidence.’ During a political sequence, a site becomes saturated with new, real, possibilities for *what can be* (i.e. socialism, severance for all, the prospect that “it is the workers who count the workers,” and so on). Once this sequence of politics ends, the particular objects and names that were at play in this sequence can become “worn out or saturated.” A ‘worn out’ word is one that is no longer adequate for forcefully pushing back against the existing social and political order of things. Put differently, past prescriptions like ‘socialism’ and ‘severance for all’ are not always useful for future political sequences. Nonetheless, when we inquire into *how thinking happened* in past political sequences, this proves that people’s thought is capable of refuting the domination of bosses and politicians, and thereby transforming a given social order.

Lazarus contrasts the task of the inquirer with the task of the social scientist and historian. Historians and scientists attempt to define the requisites that supposedly determine a moment of political contestation, and to explain why this contestation ultimately failed. For instance, “the prevailing explanations for the collapse of socialism have commanded the establishment of a revived and *purged* historicism” (Lazarus

2015, 175). Lazarus, who wrote *Anthropology of the Name* in the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, knows all too well that historicism thrives in moments when resistance to capitalism is lethargic and depressed. In such moments, the ruling order's dominion over thinking begins to seem inevitable, and so the conclusion of historicism (namely, that thought cannot challenge the extant) starts to sound like common sense. By contrast, inquiry is an ongoing refutation of the historicist/scientific paradigm: "There are...unnamable names. The anthropology of the name maintains that the only possible enterprise of naming consists in the naming of the sites of the name and the identification of the category" (2015, 166). When people think, they assert that they are "unnamable," refuting the authority of any boss, politician, or party who attempts to define or count their existence (Lazarus 2019). For this reason, people's thought is doubly endangered. First it is endangered by the naming procedures of politicians, bosses, and state authorities. Then, it is challenged again by the social historians and scientists who revive the "enterprise of naming." Rather than stage yet another siege upon the "unnamable," Lazarus' inquirer returns to the site where political contestation took place, and asks "what does thought think when it thinks?" (Lazarus 2015, x). The inquirer's task is therefore to resuscitate enthusiasm – identifying our past, present, and future capacity to refute the necessity of *what already is*.

Put differently, the inquirer reverses the historian's description of the relationship between thought and the real. Politics has sites, but the sites themselves are determined by people's thinking, and not vice versa. The most we can say about the relationship between the worker and the factory is that, "At the factory is the worker" (Lazarus 2015, 154). The factory doesn't determine the worker; it is instead one of the places where the worker's thought and action can potentially take place. Lazarus argues that this reversal is essential for "postclassist" political analysis (Lazarus, 2019). A classist analysis would attempt to define workers' thinking by way of their 'real' or 'material' social position. For example, because the Paris auto factory strikers' demands were "factualized, materialized," and "put to work" as the demands of auto workers, we could easily conclude that 'Here *People did not think, only workers thought*.' This would pave the way for an interpretation of the strikes in which we would name a particular radical or revolutionary social group, and explain the conditions that led to their resistance. However, Lazarus would point out that once a site becomes a *political* site, we can no longer make sense of people's intellectuality by studying their social position. Although the workers are still subjugated by their bosses, they begin to insist that *The boss does not determine me, for another subjectivation is possible*.

In conclusion, Lazarus' rigorous conceptualization of "political investigation" enables us to understand past political struggles against the dominant social order without reducing them to a long series of failures. Here again, contrasting Lazarus with Badiou proves useful. In Badiou's analysis of politics, the end of fidelity is necessarily a moment of failure: "to fail to live up to a fidelity is Evil in the sense of *betrayal*, betrayal in oneself of the immortal that you are." By contrast, Lazarus' "Preface to the English Edition" introduces *Anthropology of the Name* as a project that intends to nourish enthusiasm:

What I would readily call the site of the book named *Anthropology of the Name* is an enthusiastic site. Enthusiastic about what? For one thing, about the fact that a new conception of politics can be opposed to the end of the great period that extends from the Russian Revolution to today (Lazarus 2015, ix).

If the task of politics is to contest the extant itself, then the task of inquiry is to oppose the scientific and historical paradigm of our time. This opposition requires a “new conception of politics,” and therefore a different approach to studying the sites where politics once took place, a different way of identifying the political sequences of “the great period that extends from the Russian Revolution to today.” By naming ‘enthusiasm for possibility’ as the disposition that allows us to identify politics, and by “configuring the real through prescriptions and possibles,” Lazarus poses a significant challenge to the persistent, violent demand that thought hold forth on its requisites. We, in turn, would be naive to neglect the tremendous possibility nourished by such an endeavor.

Notes

- 1 “‘People’ is an indistinct. Nothing is prejudged (this is what makes it ‘indistinct’), except their existence (and this is what makes the term certain)” (Lazarus 2015, x).
- 2 Recently, an international group of Marxist scholars whose work is increasingly influenced by Lazarus organized the first American conference dedicated to studying his work. See Haider, Marasco, Neocosmos, Tutt, Tupinambá 2020.
- 3 To name a few examples, see Neocosmos 2016, Wamba-dia-Wamba 1993 and 1994, Corcoran 2015, Harper 2016, and Bosteels 2018. For one attempt to disentangle Lazarus and Badiou’s thinking on time, see Calcagno 2007.
- 4 Lazarus and Badiou together formed a post-Leninist, post-Maoist political group called “Organisation Politique.” For a short history of this organization, see McLaverty-Robinson 2015.
- 5 One interpreter who has tried to center Lazarus’ methodology in his reading of *Anthropology of the Name* is Asad Haider. See Haider, 2018.
- 6 Indeed, my engagement with Badiou in this paper is relatively narrow. I focus on his formulation of fidelity in *Ethics*, and I supplement this reading with passages from *Logic of Worlds*, *Metapolitics*, and Plato’s *Republic* that either directly engage with Lazarus or help further develop Badiou’s notion of fidelity.
- 7 This example is far from random. Lazarus has been particularly well-received outside of France by Marxists who study past sequences of resistance against racism and colonization. See Neocosmos 2016, Wamba-dia-Wamba 1993 and 1994, and Haider 2019.
- 8 To offer one example, Lazarus is particularly critical of previous Marxist thinkers who view worker’s thinking as a simple reaction to pre-existing external historical conditions like ‘the economy’ or ‘class struggle.’
- 9 “From the standpoint of an investigation of forms of thought, the dialectic of the objective and the subjective is a direct mapping of intellectuality onto an exterior reality” (Lazarus 2015, 78).
- 10 Lazarus attributes Lenin’s refutation of Marxist determinism to his early works – and most especially to *What is to be Done?* See Lazarus 2007, 255.
- 11 To rephrase this claim as a conditional syllogism: ‘If there is enthusiasm, then politics happened here.’
- 12 Although Lazarus adopts Mao’s notion of enthusiasm, he also argues that Mao’s distinction between ‘new’ and ‘old’ is less helpful for identifying modes of politics than his own opposition of the extant and the possible: “But it is not a matter here of a problematic position that, through the new and the rupture, would reintroduce revolt or social upheaval, even revolution. If this were so, we would find ourselves facing a new attempt at the historicization of forms of thought, by opposing two forms: one which would reflect on the same and the law in historical processes – it is what would maintain, regarding the phenomena that it studies, the said history as a *longue durée*; and the other which would maintain that it is the history of ruptures, transformations, mutation, revolutions that are situated at the heart of the order of things” (Lazarus 2019).

13 These two claims regarding enthusiasm do create necessary conditions for enthusiasm's existence. Enthusiasm, unlike people's thought, does hold forth on its requisites. More specifically, people's thought is required for the creation of 'an enthusiastic site.' To put this as a conditional syllogism: it is true that "If there is enthusiasm, then there is people's thought." However, it is not true that "If there is people's thought, then there is enthusiasm." If the first statement were false, enthusiasm would not be helpful for identifying moments when people think. If the second statement were true, enthusiasm would become a requisite for people's thoughts. Lazarus thinks that enthusiasm can help us identify particular moments where people think, but he wants to avoid using enthusiasm to give a full account of what does and doesn't count as people's thinking.

14 For a more extensive treatment of Lazarus' discussion of the French auto worker strikes, see Haider 2018.

15 Of course, Lazarus is not the first one to give inquiry or "worker's inquiry" a vital role in radical political struggles (see Haider and Mohandesi, 2013, and Hoffman 2019). What is unique about Lazarus is his understanding of the inquirer as a figure who asserts that another world is possible, and who radically contests the historians and social scientists of her time on behalf of this possibility.

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Biography

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