

LUKAS VERBURGT

‘WE, PHILOSOPHERS, ARE NOT ALLOWED TO SLEEP!’¹

Review of: Alain Badiou (2009/2011) *Second Manifesto for Philosophy*.
Cambridge/Malden: Polity Press, 164 p.

Krisis, 2011, Issue 2
www.krisis.eu

*You know something is happening here, but you don't know what it is.
Do you?*

Bob Dylan, *Ballad of a Thin Man* (1965)

*It is not a question of saying what few think and knowing what it means
to think [...] It is a question of someone – if only one – with the neces-
sary modesty not managing to know what everybody knows and mod-
estly denying what everybody is supposed to recognize [...] at the risk of
playing the idiot...*

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

When Alain Badiou remarks that consensus is not one of his strongest points (Badiou in Toscano 2000: 2) this hardly captures his deliberate provocations, overturning of the totality of existing philosophical traditions, and straight-forward aversion to opinion which have made him one of the most notorious and well-known figures in contemporary philosophy. At the same time, the role that can be assigned to Badiou is not exactly that of adding a philosophy to other philosophies, but rather that of performing the militant act of destroying philosophy as it currently exists. Destroying, that is, by returning it to its genuine Platonic task of destabilizing

dominant opinion and showing its urgency, its intense and maximal existence – for, according to Badiou, philosophy ‘*when it truly appears, is either reckless or it is nothing*’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 71). Not unlike most of his other works, Badiou’s *Second Manifesto* will strike the ‘unsympathetic’ reader as needlessly arrogant, polemical and – in other words – enough to prematurely abandon a confrontation with his thought. It is, however, impossible as much as it is regretful not to see the sheer originality of Badiou’s radical project or perhaps, as Slavoj Žižek suggested (see Engelmann 2005/2009), not to think of Badiou as one of the most important events of contemporary philosophy.

The place of the *Manifesto(s)* in Badiou’s thought

Badiou published his 1989 *Manifesto for Philosophy* as a fierce reaction to the burial of the May ’68 events by the so-called *nouveaux philosophes*. These ‘newborn liberals’ or contemporary sophists not only declared philosophy dead, archaic and impossible-*because-completed*, but also came to deliver its existence over to one of its – what Badiou (1989) calls – conditions, namely either art, science, politics or love. Badiou had it that this immodest declaration of the End of the Great Narratives – i.e. philosophy thinking its own annihilation – goes hand in hand with an affirmation of liberal capitalism as the only viable ethico-political regime (see Badiou 1989, 2001). In his wit, Badiou proposed to take ‘one more step’ by declaring ‘The End of the End of Philosophy’ and considering the amendments of the *nouveau philosophes* as the deluded attempt to fuse philosophy with the freedom of opinion, that is to say, with its one and only enemy (Badiou in Toscano 2000: 222). Badiou intended his ‘Platonic gesture’ as both a polemical attack on the whole of 20th century anti-Platonism² as well as an analytical revival of Plato’s practice of the conditioning of philosophy. This doctrine of conditions – which marks an important internal rupture in Badiou’s philosophy running from *The Theory of the Subject* (1982), *Being and Event* (1988/2007) to *Conditions* (1992) – comprises the claim that philosophy itself does not produce truths and cannot even think by itself, but is entirely dependent on its conditions. Badiou defined philosophy as a stage on which new eternal truths can be thought or ut-

tered – which, paradoxically, explicates that philosophy is irreducible to any other form of thought, although it is exactly the non-philosophical that provides for its existence. This Platonist emphasis on the conditioning of philosophy, the idea of eternal Truths and their intrinsic relation to the Subject via an ‘event’ enabled Badiou to almost immediately distinguish himself from most of his (French) contemporaries (see Balibar in Hallward 2004).

Where this sweeping first *Manifesto* argued for philosophy’s continued existence – and against ‘*the pathos of its accomplishment*’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 119) – Badiou’s recently published *Second Manifesto* is dedicated to its revolutionary pertinence that, as he claims, stands in direct opposition to ‘*the servile dogmatism making it a component of Western propaganda*’ (ibid.). In terms of his major philosophical works the two manifestos, arguably, mark the transition from *Being and Event* (Badiou 1988/2007) – which argued for the being of truths – to *Logics of Worlds* (2007) – in which Badiou attempts to analyze the appearing of these truths. That is, where he in 1989 emphasized the possibility of ‘de-suturing’ philosophy from (one of) its conditions, twenty years later Badiou sets out to re-affirm the essence of philosophy by means of a transcendental evaluation of what it has become in the ‘world of appearing’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 70). In other words, Badiou describes how in twenty years the status of philosophy has changed from a detrimental, self-sacrificing altruism – nearly causing its inexistence – to an explicit, self-advertising ‘prostitution’ – characterized by an over-existence.

Philosophy’s existence today is in fact characterized by an over-abundance. As goes Badiou’s militant proclamation: ‘*If philosophy’s existence was declared minimal twenty years ago, one could today maintain that it finds itself no less under threat, but for the diametrically opposed reason that it is now endowed with an excessive, artificial existence [...] ‘Philosophy’ is everywhere. It serves as a trademark for various media pundits. It livens up cafés and health clubs. It has its magazines and its gurus*’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 68). In his characteristic reckless and uncompromising mixture of academic rigour and radical leftist tone, Badiou argues that what today goes under the name of philosophy is nothing but a liberal-capitalist-conservative ‘Yankee’ moralism. Since Badiou is convinced

that in our times philosophy is but recognized when it qualifies as moral or ethical preaching his explicit task is to ‘de-moralize’ philosophy. The way Badiou sets out to actually achieve this, i.e. to set philosophy up against opinion, against language, against the sophist and beyond the human (see Badiou in Brassier & Mackey 2007, and also Meillassoux 2007) is through mathematical and logical formalization.

From the mathematics of being to the logic of appearing

The whole of Badiou’s work is marked by a crucial distinction between being-qua-being as expressed by mathematics and being-there or being-qua-appearing in the world captured by logic.³ The major propositions of the former approach are set out in *Being and Event* in which Badiou uses a mathematical formalization of ontological discourse by appropriating Georg Cantor’s set theory of multiplicities.⁴ Badiou here suggests that the consistent existence of a being as a being (i.e. as a thing) is only the secondary result of an ‘in-consistent’ mathematical operation (the ‘count’).⁵ In the first *Manifesto* Badiou presents the ‘event’ (his examples include political revolutions, scientific and artistic inventions and ‘true’ love) as a rupture that evokes this ‘void’ from the midst of consistent beings – i.e. that which according to the totality of what is counted counts for nothing. While events are rare and necessarily undecidable, Badiou argues that they find their ontological guarantee in the fact that what exists cannot exhaust the ‘not’ from which it was caused.⁶

As such, his *Second Manifesto* is only a provocative exemplification of the transition to the logics of phenomenal appearing that Badiou made after the bold ontological-mathematical claims in *Being and Event*. Although Badiou presents it as a declaration, it is also a reworked but rather dense excerpt from his *Logics of Worlds* and a bare formal fragment of most of the other books he has written, roughly, in the last decade.

The *Second Manifesto*’s outline, nevertheless, is clear; Badiou wants to argue that philosophy can and must, assumingly now more than ever, make sense of the ontological existence of eventual truths in the everyday

world. In an inimitable *tour de force* he sets out to show that truths have the character of overturning the logic of a world by transforming its very prescriptions of appearing (see Badiou 2003, 2007, 2009/2011). On the basis of the thesis that the being-there of a multiplicity consists of its forms of relations by which it is differentiated from others and itself – the proof of which he somewhat presumptuously establishes by referring to his *Logics of Worlds* – Badiou defines a world as the logical system of ‘*differences and identities that connects [multiplicities] to all the others*’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 31). Successively, he develops two related notions – that of size and degree (of identities) which are presented as the sufficient transcendental formalizations of the world of appearing – in order to be able to radically establish a truth’s appearing as an exception to the appearing of ordinary multiplicities (notably, bodies and languages).⁸

Where size marks the fact that ‘*any two multiplicities differ as soon as an element possessed by the one of them is not an element of the other*’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 34), degrees put these elements of a multiplicity in an order structure with others so that ‘*a thing can be very similar to another, or similar in certain points and different by way of others, or somewhat identical [...] and so on*’ (ibid.: 51).⁹ In Badiou’s key example that runs through the whole of the book, the degree of identity of a multiplicity of trees by the roadside can be very high for a motorist – so that it appears as a monotonous series – whereas for a daydreamer scrutinizing their shapes and shades the trees are very different from each other such that the degree of their identity is very weak (ibid.: 37). The system of these logical rules of appearance enables Badiou to analyze existence as a gradual movement from (ontological) being to (phenomenological) being-there and to pose the crucial question of how ‘*on the path leading to existence [...] objectivity originates, [i.e.] how a pure multiplicity can appear in a world*’ (ibid.: 49). Badiou supposes that the answer to this latter question – which, as such, marks the attempt to use the liveliness of logics to deal with the formality of the ontological orientation of *Being and Event* (see Hallward 2008) – can be given quite easily; a multiplicity exists in the world if the degree of identity of this multiplicity to itself is maximal, so that it completely affirms its own identity.

Against, what Badiou calls, the ‘democratic materialist’ who deems every

new truth a modification of the ‘same world’¹⁰, Badiou makes three crucial claims which can only be schematically referred to here. Firstly, if a multiplicity’s degree of identity is equal to zero this multiplicity does not exist in the world, that is to say that its existence is defined by a non-existence (ibid.: 58). Secondly, Badiou presents the claim that ‘*if a multiplicity appears in a world, one element of this multiplicity [...] is an inexistent of this world*’ (ibid.: 60); and thirdly he argues that eventual truths can be characterized as exceptions to the laws of appearing – which indicates that they are indifferent to any specific world. In other words, Badiou thinks of a truth as a redefinition of what is able to appear and, successively, as a process in which a former inexistent is ‘*raising up from the minimal or nil value to the maximal value*’ (ibid.: 80). Necessarily, since a truth only appears at/as the very moment of the overturning of the laws of appearance it, firstly, does not exist under the given laws which it overturns and, secondly, because it itself will fall under the new laws it establishes, only its consequences will remain. These worldly consequences initiate what Badiou calls a body of truth and, successively, compel it to incorporate itself within the raising up of a former inexistent to the highest possible degree of existence.

As in so many of Badiou’s other works, it is the subject that takes up the discipline of being faithful to such a disruption of the laws of appearing – as opposed to the reactive (indifferent) or obscure (hostile) subject – that is able to acknowledge and keep the worldly appearance of a truth in existence. In a quasi-religious sense Badiou also upholds that it is only in its fidelity to a truth that a human life is universalized, that a ‘*life is raised up and accomplished by having participated in this way beyond [its] simple subsistence*’ (ibid.: 109, see also Badiou 2001, Johnston 2007).

An afterword

Badiou’s tone in his *Second Manifesto* is characteristic; his arguments are slogans, his lines of thought proclamations and his conclusions nothing but radical decisions to uphold truth as both eternal and egalitarian in its address. And not unlike that of most of his other works, Badiou’s polemic

in this new book is most of all effective in setting up the sympathetic reader (his militant companion) against all of those who threaten the development of a (read: *his*) contemporary philosophy worthy of its name (see Toscano 2000). For this reason, it is indeed tempting to suggest – as does Clemens (2001) – that Badiou again proves himself guilty of sophistic oversimplification (of his adversaries – mostly liberal capitalist straw men) and dogmatism (by assuming that the sophist ‘ought not to exist’) (see Papastephanou 2010). But this attempt to reduce Badiou’s proposals is, arguably, exactly his opponent’s last escape; by denying that anything new is happening here s/he tries to open up the possibility of indifference. But what if there is really, as Žižek repeatedly says, a figure like Plato and Hegel walking among us? What if philosophy once again could feel the urge to interrupt the continuity of everyday life and ‘to say to others: “Wake up! The time of new thinking and acting is here!”’ (Badiou 2009: 3). After reading the *Second Manifesto* one must, indeed, either say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to it.¹¹ If one does not dare to do this, it is a good read anyway...

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Lukas Verburgt – ‘We, philosophers, are not allowed to sleep!’

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¹ Badiou (2009: 3)

² In his *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* Badiou makes the following remark: "Platonism" is that common figure, the contemporary montage of opinion, or configuration that circulates from Heidegger to Deleuze, from Nietzsche to Bergson, but also from Marxists to positivists and which is still used by the counterrevolutionary new philosophers ("Plato as the first of the totalitarian master thinkers") [...] "Platonism" [thus] serves as a type of general negative prop: it only exists to legitimate the new under the heading of

anti-Platonism' (Badiou in Bartlett & Clemens 2010: 112) See also Badiou (1989), Clemens (2001).

³ See Badiou (2008), Clemens (2001), Smith in Hallward (2004) and Tho (2007, 2008) for Badiou's take on both the relation between mathematics and logic and the role of philosophy.

⁴ Being both a philosopher and mathematician Badiou is able to align himself with a 'neglected' mathematical tradition in French philosophy and to draw from various 19th and 20th century mathematical inventions such as set theory (in *Being and Event*) and topos theory (in *Logics of Worlds*). Badiou's (incessant) use of mathematical tools recalls the phrase engraved at the door of Plato's academy ('Let no one ignorant of geometry enter!') and directly indicates Badiou's fidelity to the event of Cantor's transfinite set theory that made Plato's adage possible. See also Ling in Bartlett & Clemens (2010), Sedofsky (1994) and Tho (2007).

⁵ As Gillespie (2008) remarks, the advantages of Badiou's use of set theory for approaching ontology and truth are determined by what lies at its ground, namely inconsistency, or the void. This is the case, since 'what the uniform presentation of an ontological situation assumes as its foundation is a pure multiplicity underlying, and preceding, any act of presentation. The name for this inconsistency will be the void' (Gillespie 2008: 12, see also Badiou 1988/2004, 2008). More straightforward, Badiou uses Cantor's mathematical demonstration of infinity's existence as the 'ground' of his ontology.

⁶ That what is presented, structured or 'counted' in experience 'cannot exhaust the ontological resources of inconsistency' [since] 'the inherent multiplicity ['the void' or 'zero', L.V.] of any situation escapes the grasp of consistent presentation' (Gillespie 2008: 3–4).

⁷ That is to say; without difference to determine identity multiplicities could not exist as 'ones'. Badiou states that existence is conditioned by something like negation as well as self-differing, which equates with what he refers to as the void – and which is reflected in set theory's use of the 'empty set'. See Badiou (2009), Clemens (2001) and Coombs (2010).

⁸ Badiou explicitly declares himself a materialist, but distinguishes himself from what he calls ‘democratic materialism’ (see Badiou 2009/2011: 20). See also Badiou 2008b, 2009.

⁹ Although sizes and degrees are also crucially related to the distinction between ontology and appearance – in the sense that ‘*ontological difference does not necessarily coincide with difference in appearing*’ (Badiou 2009/2011: 34) - this will not be of our concern here.

¹⁰ Or, in other words, for which change remains immanent to the laws of the world, much like Spinoza’s ‘(infinite) modes’. The proximity of Badiou to Spinoza’s work suggests that he also explicitly thinks of his notion of truth as an immanent break, although he understands it as counting as an absolute new beginning or ‘rupture’. See for an analysis of the relation between Badiou and Spinoza Roffe in Bartlett & Clemens (2010).

¹¹ This does, of course, not mean that one has to ‘believe’ in Badiou or not, but rather that his proposal must be confronted as one of contemporary philosophy’s most daring philosophical projects. Obviously, there have been and will be developed many arguments against his, and numerous lacunas in his works have been laid bare (see, for instance, Bryant et.al. 2011 for a critical account and theoretical explorations on a ‘Badiouian’ theme); the point is that it seems almost impossible to approach Badiou’s philosophy with total indifference.