

# Contemporary Thought and the Crisis of Negation

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## ABSTRACT

The problem of the way out, traditionally conceived in negative terms: as an 'opposition to', 'critique of', 'rebellion against' or, simply, as a 'negation of', is all the more acute in the present conjecture, whether one calls it the state of exception, capitalist-parliamentarism, post-democracy or the discourse of the capitalist, as the new regime of mastery, knowing no limit, no outside and therefore no exception, seems to annihilate the possibility of a way out that would articulate the negation of the present with the creation of an alternative to that which exists. If contemporary thought faces today the growing impasses of the way out, this is partly, at least, due, according to Badiou, to the crisis of negation. Insofar as there is no question more burning today than the question of the way out, i.e. the possibility of a radical break with the existing state of affairs capable of initiating change within the late capitalist conjecture, or, in Badiou's words, capable of transforming the transcendental of the present world, our task can be none other than to examine to what extent contemporary thought, associating psychoanalysis and philosophy, can rise to this challenge.

## Keywords:

philosophy, psychoanalysis, Badiou, Lacan, negation, resistance, emancipation

Insofar as there is no question more burning today than the question of the way out, i.e. the possibility of a radical break with the existing state of affairs, capable of initiating change within the late capitalist conjecture, or, in Badiou's words, capable of transforming the transcendental of the present world, our task can be none other than to examine to what extent contemporary thought, associating psychoanalysis and philosophy, can rise to this challenge. If contemporary thought faces today the growing impasses of the way out, this is partly, at least due, according to Badiou, to the crisis of negation.<sup>1</sup> The problem of the way out, traditionally conceived in negative terms: as an 'opposition to', 'critique of', 'rebellion against' or, simply, as a 'negation of', is all the more acute in the present conjecture, whether one calls it the state of exception, capitalist-parliamentarism, post-democracy or the discourse of the capitalist, as

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<sup>1</sup> Badiou, 2014, pp. 45-55.

the new regime of mastery, knowing no limit, no outside and therefore no exception, seems to annihilate the very nexus of negation and creation, i.e. the possibility of a way out that would articulate the negation of the present with the creation of an alternative to that which exists.

As a consequence, contemporary responses to a perceived crisis of negation as a condition for a new beginning, a creation of some novelty, center around attempts to conceptualise differently the locations in which we might uncover a reserve of transformative potential of thought. Renouncing the temptation of looking for an alternative to capitalism in an exterior, in something which capitalism cannot appropriate, contemporary thinkers conceptualise potential for change at the heart of capital's power. In what follows, I intend to critically engage with this quest for such a potential from a slightly different perspective. My point of departure is a shift that has been taking place in contemporary thought over the past three decades, namely, a drift away from an understanding of the break with the existing state of affairs in terms of a dialectical relationship between destruction and construction, towards an account of the way out from the here and now, in terms of resistance, the latter being conceived in non-dialectical terms. This move, from a dialectical to a non-dialectical account of the way out, while marking 'a sort of crisis of trust in the power of negativity,'<sup>2</sup> to borrow Badiou's term, signals at the same time a radical transformation of the relationship between thought and the rebellion of the body.

An intriguing account of this shift, which appears to be itself a direct consequence of the weakening, if not the ruin, of the category of negativity, especially in the realm of politics, can be found in Jean-Claude Milner's book, *Constats*. According to Milner, revolutionary politics maintains its pre-eminence so long as it is grounded in the conjunction of thought and rebellion. What is meant by politics is nothing less than the capacity of thought to produce material effects in the social field, the privileged figure of these effects being the insurrection of the social body.<sup>3</sup> Seen from this perspective, the defeat, or retreat, of emancipatory politics (in this reading, identified with politics *tout court*), that we have been witnessing for the past three decades, signals the incapacity of contemporary thought to translate its

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2 Badiou, 2014, p. 46.

3 Milner, 2002, p. 24..

effects into rebellion.

It should be noted, however, that this postulation of the thought-rebellion link suggests no 'natural' affinity between the two. On the contrary, if the emergence of the conjunction of thought and rebellion marks the break of modernity in the domain of politics, as Milner claims, this is only due to the fact that modern political thought, in opposition to the classical thought, which precludes the very idea of linking these two heterogeneous terms, is centred around their 'unnatural' union. Indeed, for classical political philosophy, grounded in the assumption of the unbridgeable gap between thought and the body, rebellion, situated in the somatic moment rather than in thought, represents the impossible-real of politics, and, thus, remains inconceivable.<sup>4</sup> The linking of thought and rebellion, that is, of two, ultimately incompatible entities, inasmuch as the latter is designated as the negation of the former, would, then, mark the invention of a new politics. Setting out from the assumption that there is no intrinsic bond between the body and thought, nor a common ground upon which they could initially meet, modernity is assigned the task of providing a base for their conjunction. As Milner rightly observes, in the modern universe of science (this being a universe without beyond, a universe that knows of no limit and no measure), thought and rebellion cannot meet. Hence, to make their union possible, the 'ethics of the maximum',<sup>5</sup> as Milner calls it, must intervene. This is because only 'extremist' ethics, one that drives the subject beyond the possible into the impossible, that requires a finite, mortal, speaking being to act as if he were immortal,<sup>6</sup> can establish a link between thought and the body, thus, providing a proper grounding for a politics that would constitute a proper way out in the infinite universe. Seen in this perspective, the way out, conceived as a politics of emancipation, appears to be less a matter of redemption, of repairing a wrong done to victims, as an experience of exploring the unheard-of, indeed 'impossible', possibilities of a given situation.

We can understand, now, why the emancipationist paradigm, so construed, is condemned to collapse once the alliance of thought and rebellion starts to falter, and the process of their dissociation sets in. What is striking about Milner's account is the judiciousness with which

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4 Milner, p. 34..

5 Milner, p. 26..

6 Milner, p. 27..

the negative implications of the process of disjunction, of the drifting apart of thought and rebellion that we are witness to today, are brought to the fore: thought ceases to be politically subversive; worse, thought is worth its name only by being conservative, hostile to all forms of rebellion, while rebellion, on the other hand, is true to its nature only by expressing itself through a thoughtless, headless brutality.<sup>7</sup> Put another way, thought marks the dissociation from rebellion by its growing powerlessness to produce material effects in the political and the social field, whereas rebellion records its break with thought by turning into a resistance against thought, in short, by being the unthought. The present antinomic, non-dialectical relationship between thought and rebellion can thus be accounted for in terms of a forced choice between 'I am (not)' and 'I am (not) thinking'. Confronted with the disjunction, according to which I am, the corporeal presence, there where I am not thinking and vice versa, rebellion assuredly opts for the 'I am' and therefore for the 'I am not thinking', suggesting that what is lost in this forced choice in any case is precisely a resistant thought, a thought capable of inciting rebellion. This is evident in contemporary theorising about resistance, insofar as that which is, strictly speaking, a problem (namely, the antinomy between thought and resistance), is proposed as a solution.

This is of particular importance for, as we will argue in what follows, the fact that the choice of resistance appears to be a true forced choice, certainly unavoidable for a thought that seeks to indicate its separation, both from the solution put forward by the traditional theories of emancipation, as well as from the present-day ideology celebrating the worldwide victory of the alliance of capitalism and representative democracy, signals that contemporary theorising about the way out has reached an impasse. Hence, it is hardly surprising that contemporary theorists of resistance, while insisting on its necessity, readily admit that resistance in the present conjecture of globalisation may well be perfectly useless. Consider the following statement: 'I say resistance without any delusion about the consequences of that resistance'.<sup>8</sup> Crudely put, resistance today may well appear to be nothing but an invention of the system itself, a response orchestrated by it, in short, part of its defensive strategy. The reason for this is the mutation of the

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<sup>7</sup> Milner, p. 51..

<sup>8</sup> Lyotard and Larochele, 1992, p. 417.

present regime of mastery, which, having as its structural principle the generalisation of exception, succeeds in creating through this very lawlessness an interminable status quo, immune to all change. For, what is paradoxical about the regime founded on the generalised exception and suspension of the law, a world in which the law is made to coincide entirely with the lawlessness, is that the regime, instead of breaking down, keeps running. The eternisation of the existing state of affairs provides us with a plausible key to identifying the difficulties of contemporary theory of resistance in finding a way out of the present impasse.

To understand how the present mutation of the dominant power structure bears upon our sense of the possibility of its negation, and its transformation; and how this, in turn, has come to permeate the very activity of thought itself, it may be helpful to turn to Lacan. His succinct remark gives us a penetrating insight into the problem: 'In relating this misery [caused by capitalism] to the discourse of the capitalist, I denounce the latter. Only here, I point out in all seriousness that I cannot do this, because in denouncing it, I reinforce it—by normalising it, that is, improving it'.<sup>9</sup> This cryptic remark seems to convey Lacan's principled pessimism with regard to the possible exit from capitalism, the contemporary regime of mastery. For, what we have here is the reversal of the usual 'progressivist' interpretation of Marx's dictum: 'the limit of capital is capital itself,' according to which, due to the inexorable laws of the development of productive forces, capitalism will come up against a limit it cannot overcome and therefore face its own ruin. The lesson to be drawn from Lacan's remark is quite different: instead of an announcement of the inevitable end of capitalism, it brutally states that any attempt at stopping the working of capitalism, far from surpassing it, consolidates it. Thus, if capitalism refuses to collapse, to come up against the limit of its own growth and expansion, this is due to what Lacan calls its structural 'greediness'<sup>10</sup>, as capitalism itself is nothing but the impasse of growth. This also explains why this structural deadlock, this growing impasse of capitalism, is a stimulus, rather than an impediment to its further development. What then, would a way out of capitalist domination be if all solution seems to become entangled in the growing impasses of the capitalist's drive for growth?

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan, 1990, pp. 13-14.

<sup>10</sup> Lacan, 1990, p. 28.

To be sure, Foucault's, Lyotard's, Derrida's, Deleuze's, Nancy's, and Agamben's work stems from a certain sense of negation and its creative, i.e. emancipatory potential, yet without laying claim to a world transforming perspective initiated through politics. The solution put forward by these theorists who appear to be taking distance from a political solution, yet who refuse to despair because the revolutionary politics traditionally considered as the way out is finished with, consists in emphatically asserting the continuation of resistance by other means, and on other terrains.

One might ask, though, what motivates this belief in the ineradicability of resistance, especially as the assumption by many contemporary theorists of resistance is, that there is no privileged site from which to launch resistance. Once resistance is no longer linked to some already-existing, and identifiable node, such as the proletariat, its emergence can, in principle, be accounted for in two different ways. According to the first account, the possibility of resistance resides in the fact that the social field, which is itself only to the extent that it is traversed by various and even conflicting forces, appears to be non-totalisable, a not-all. This would imply that a space for resistance is opened up by the very incommensurability of these forces which turn the socio-political space into a site of endless struggle. In the second interpretation, however, advanced primarily by Lyotard and Deleuze, resistance testifies to the fact that a given system or regime of domination incorporates some 'intractable' heterogeneity,<sup>11</sup> which has the power to jam its functioning. Several terms have been proposed to designate this resistant particularity: Lyotard calls it 'the intractable,' Lacan theorises it under *objet petit a*, and Foucault's word for it is 'the pleb'. All these concepts come to characterise this, with respect to the system, immanent node of resistance in terms of some elusive, unfathomable, ungraspable entity, pregnant with paradoxical oppositions: it has no substance, no figure and therefore no 'proper' embodiment, yet there is a proliferation of disguises under which it manifests its presence; it represents a hard, inert kernel that resists the system, yet it seems to dissolve into nothingness as soon as we try to pin it to some positive entity.

Generally speaking, we can consider these various, often mutually exclusive, attempts of conceiving an effective resistance that would be attuned to the deadlocks of our situation a symptom of the breakdown

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11 Lyotard, 1993, pp. 168-169.

of the classical, i.e. dialectical notion of negation. Indeed, with the emergence of a new regime of mastery that knows no limit, no outside, negation no longer constitutes a true principle of creation. Rather, taken in its purely destructive aspect, negation, instead of constituting a *conditio sine qua non* for the emergence of some epoch breaking novelty, remains capable of doing away with the old, yet proves to be powerless in giving rise to a new creation. As a result, the question of the relationship between negation and creation must be re-posed in such a way that the emphasis is less on the destructive aspect of negation than on its capacity of creating, within the existing regime of mastery and at a distance from it, a space of independence and autonomy for the subject's decisions and actions.

An idea of the emancipatory potential of such a 'subtractive' negation, to take up Badiou's term, can be found in Lacan's staging of a non-dialectical relationship between psychoanalysis or, more precisely, the discourse of the analyst, and the existing regime of mastery and domination, the discourse of the capitalist. Instead of a critique which is, by structural necessity, caught in the vicious circle of the drive for growth, Lacan proposes the following solution: 'The more saints, the more laughter; that's my principle, to wit, the way out of capitalist discourse—which will not constitute progress, if it happens only for some.'<sup>12</sup>

How is the position of the saint to be understood in terms of negation? As evidence that all critique, all opposition, all resistance is, ultimately, illusory, useless? Rejecting critique and negation as being outdated today, Lacan rejects at the same time a widespread practice of self-accusation en vogue among contemporary philosophers burdening philosophy with crimes it had not committed (from Auschwitz to Goulag). In response to those who would be taking 'all the burdens of the world's misery on to their shoulders', Lacan states emphatically: 'One thing is certain: to take the misery on to one's shoulders ... is to enter into a discourse that determines it, even if only in protest'. What Lacan proposes instead is the following advice: those who are 'busying themselves at [the] supposed burdening, oughtn't to be protesting, but collaborating. Whether they know it or not, that's what they're doing'<sup>13</sup>.

Does it mean that Lacan preaches the 'heroism' of renunciation

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12 Lacan, 1990, p. 16.

13 Lacan, 1990, p. 13.

and collaboration? Indeed, if Lacan is justified in using these terms in connection with psychoanalysis, presented as a solution, this is only on condition of a radical recasting of this notion of the way out. First of all, it should be noted that to propose psychoanalysis as a solution, as the way out of capitalism, is only possible in the very specific circumstance of the collapse of the belief in the emancipatory power of critique and negation such as has been incarnated in revolutionary politics. Indeed, one is tempted to say that psychoanalysis, which, according to Lacan, is capable of succeeding there where the politics of emancipation failed, to find a way out of the growing impasses of capitalism, emerges as a *tenant-lieu*, a place-holder of the impossible, absent emancipatory politics. This, however, is only possible inasmuch as psychoanalysis itself is considered by Lacan as a refusal of a sort, more specifically, as a resistance to the pressures of civilisation to conform.

The main difficulty that confronts psychoanalysis in proposing itself as a true way out of contemporary civilisation that Lacan designates as the discourse of the capitalist, is that it must allow for a subjective position that would be antagonistic to that required by capitalism. For Lacan, such a position presents itself in the figure of the saint. Lacan's observations are important for our concerns here because, by designating the saint as the site of resistance, he clearly indicates that a resistance to capitalism, defined as a drive for growth that knows no limits, no beyond, can only be theorised in terms of some resistant instance which is, strictly speaking, neither exterior nor interior, but rather is situated at the point of exteriority in the very intimacy of interiority, the point at which the most intimate encounters the outmost. As is well known, the Lacanian name for this paradoxical intimate exteriority is 'the extimacy'. Conceived in terms of extimacy, rather than in terms of a pure alterity, resistance therefore consists in the derivation, from within capitalism, of an indigestible kernel, of an otherness which has the potential to disrupt the circuit of the drive for growth. The term 'extimacy' illuminates a significant aspect of the way in which the notion of sainthood, as a privileged site of resistance to the capitalist discourse, functioned for Lacan. Sainthood would, therefore, name a model of self-positioning in spaces in which the distinction between the inside and the outside is abolished by the dominant discourse itself. For sainthood, as practiced by the analyst, at least the analyst as Lacan defines him/her, always operates from a stance of heterogeneity and extimacy. Sainthood is an elusive positionality of resistance to the normalising effects of dominant discourse, the

perpetual reassertion of unmasterability. This sort of unmasterability, much more than a hysterical rejection of all social bonds, is precisely what Lacan intended with psychoanalysis as a solution to the deadlocks of the capitalist discourse, indeed, as an exit from it.

One might well agree with Lacan that sainthood can succeed in jamming the machine of production that feeds on the want-to-enjoy, a machine that transforms the lack-of-enjoyment into the desire to enjoy; in a word, that sainthood can interrupt the insatiable 'more' of the drive for growth, to the extent that the saint is one who refuses to produce, but, instead, persists in a certain modality of passivity or inoperativity, indeed, who assumes the position of being useless, but who becomes, paradoxically, useful in this being useless. It should be noted, however, that although it might seem that there is an affinity between the contemporary saint, i.e. the analyst who resists by 'doing nothing,' by refusing to satisfy the demand of capitalist discourse to produce and be useful, and the hysterics who resist the existing symbolic order by refusing to assume the role assigned to them by this order, we believe that it would be a serious error to conflate the resistance offered by the saint with the hysterical 'No!' precisely because the hysterical refusal, instead of impeding the drive for growth, sets it in motion. That is to say, the mere refusal of the given order, of the roles and places that have been distributed and fixed by the 'police', to use Rancière's term, in itself does not bring about a change in the situation. On the contrary, such an answer may well be expected, if not 'orchestrated', by the 'police' itself.

Crucial for our discussion here is that, in a situation in which it seems that there is no option left, Lacan puts forward a solution which consists, ultimately, in identifying the position of the subject, not with the agent or the producer, but with the product or, more precisely, with what remains after production, what is left over, with the trash. Moreover, the analyst is identified with a product that is singularly decreative, in the sense that it puts into question the received idea according to which productive action constitutes the essence of man. Despite some indisputable points of convergence between the becoming useless of Lacan's analyst-saint and the *desoeuvrement* of man—a Kojevian notion taken up by Blanchot and Nancy, as well by Agamben today, and used to describe the status of post-historic man, and a certain modus of passivity that would designate the 'non-acting action' proper to the role to be played by the analyst in an analysis—it is nevertheless clear that something quite different is at stake in Lacan's understanding of the analyst's 'doing nothing'. The saint on which Lacan

models the analyst's refusal, to be useful, to surrender to the demands of capitalism, should be viewed as a singular structural apparatus rather than a vocation. Ultimately, this difference has everything to do with Lacan's conviction that 'the fundamental mainspring of the analytic operation is the maintenance of the distance between the I—identification—and the a [the object]';<sup>14</sup> this allows Lacan to situate the way out proposed by psychoanalysis precisely at the level of that which cannot be represented, the infamous object a, at the level of what is left after the completion of dis-identification. The great virtue of 'sainthood' lies precisely in its undefinability. Without a stable feature, disposition, or set of predetermined actions, the analyst's status can best be described as an 'extimate positionality,' or 'strategic eccentricity' defined by its oppositional character vis-à-vis the position of the subject required, and modelled by the dominant discourse.

What this means is that the subject is invited to occupy the position of the object, a position which requires that charity, as well as distributive justice, are put into question. Indeed, to be able to 'embody what structure entails, namely allowing the subject, the subject of the unconscious, to take him as the cause of the subject's own desire'<sup>15</sup>, the saint-analyst must divest himself of the burden of charity. The simplest way of explaining 'what the structure entails' is to say that the analyst's function is to help the subject accede to the point of the choice of being, a kind of return to the point of departure which preceded the attribution of existence, since it allows the subject to regain his/her power of choice in order to confront once more, as it were, the original choice, being/identification, thus allowing him/her to ratify or reject his/her initial, but forced, choice. Briefly put, if what the structure of the analysis entails for the analyst is nothing less than to bring the subject to the point of his/her re-birth, since 'it is as desire's object a, as what he was to the Other in his erection as a living being, as wanted or unwanted when he came into the world, that he is called to be reborn in order to know if he wants what he desires',<sup>16</sup> and if 'it is through the abjection of this cause that the subject in question has a chance to be aware of his position',<sup>17</sup> this is possible on the proviso that the analyst guides the analysand in a wholly

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14 Lacan, 1979, p. 273.

15 Lacan, 1990, p. 15.

16 Lacan, 2006, pp. 571–572.

17 Lacan, 1990, p. 15.

disinterested manner, or, as Lacan remarks, this requires that 'the saint is the refuse of jouissance'.<sup>18</sup> This means that, in order for sainthood to be operational, charity and jouissance must be strictly separated. The important point in all this is that the analyst can be efficacious in the analysis, only, by being placed as the cause of somebody's desire. But, the price to be paid for occupying this position is the analyst's subjective destitution: incarnating the excessive leftover, that which does not count and which, for that reason, finds no place in the given order, the analyst must be willing to exit from human society, in a word, to be a dropout of humanity. Thus, it could be said that the analyst's transformation into a cause of the desire of another subject, the analysand, is 'paid for' by the analyst's conversion into an object.

In his attempt to address the question of the possibility of a way out and the powers of negation in our time, Badiou, proposes a different solution: one that essentially mobilises philosophy. Setting out from the present crisis of negation, the task of philosophy, as Badiou sees it, can be none other than to forge a 'a new logic, a new philosophical proposition adequate for all forms of creative novelty',<sup>19</sup> a new logical framework, in which the relationship between negation and creation and, consequently, the relation of politics and philosophy, is radically recasted. The solution proposed by Badiou consists of reversing classical dialectical logic, rather than simply opting for a non-mediated affirmation, as contemporary Spinozist, such as Negri, do. More specifically, philosophy today has to invent a new dialectics, an affirmative dialectics, to be precise, in which 'affirmation, or the positive proposition, comes before negation instead after it'.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, the novelty of this relationship between affirmation and negation stands out in the construction of 'a dialectical framework where something of the future comes before the negative present'.<sup>21</sup>

This curious temporal loop, where the future precedes the present, is only conceivable within a space that is, itself, constructed through subtraction. Just like psychoanalysis for Lacan, philosophy for Badiou presents itself as such a space, that is situated within the existing world, while remaining at a distance from the structuring principles of

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18 Lacan, 1990, p. 16.

19 Badiou, 2014, p. 45.

20 Badiou, 2014, p. 46.

21 Badiou, 2014, p. 46.

that world. For psychoanalysis, as Lacan conceives and practices it, and philosophy, as Badiou understands it, the main problem is that of an immanent or internal way out, which can only be practiced through the creation of a space of independence and autonomy vis-à-vis the existing regime of domination. Philosophy and psychoanalysis confront the same topological difficulty, namely, the identification of a point at which the outside meets the inside, as it is only from such a point that it is possible to radically modify the relation between the possible and the impossible, which, in turn, allows the transformation of the very transcendental framework that determines our reality. On this view, the task of philosophy is, in a sense, quite modest: 'to throw light on the fundamental choices of thought,'<sup>22</sup> whose novelty, i.e. time breaking and the existing world transcending quality, can only be evaluated from a perspective that is outside or, at least, at a distance from power, the dominant master discourse. For philosophy, to be able to clarify such transtemporal and transworldly choices, or decisions, this requires that it takes as its compass the affirmation of the taking place of an extimate exception in a given situation, whose taking place in that situation disrupts its structuring principles. The proper value of this irruption of the impossible-real, to borrow Lacan's term, consists of a radical modification of the existing relation between the possible and the impossible. It constitutes an event in Badiou's sense by creating an unheard of possibility. Hence, an event is worthy of the name precisely to the extent in which it 'interrupts the law, the rules of the structure of the situation, and thus creates a new possibility'<sup>23</sup>. This opening of a new possibility is the beginning of a process of 'the possibility of realising/ materialising the consequences of this new possibility,'<sup>24</sup> the elaboration of which could amount to the creation of a new situation. This also explains why contemporary philosophy cannot simply satisfy itself with maintaining a critical distance vis-à-vis the world as it is.

Philosophy's task today is more complex, and ambitious, at the same time. Badiou claims that the contemporary world, described as 'a sort of anarchy of more or less regulated, more or less coded fluxes, where money, products, and images are exchanged',<sup>25</sup> precisely because

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22 Badiou, 2009b, p. 19.

23 Badiou, 2014, p. 48.

24 Badiou, 2014, p. 47.

25 Badiou, 2004, p. 48.

it is as it is, precarious, inconsistent, illegible, needs philosophy, and specifically it needs a philosophy committed to chance and risk, 'a philosophy opened to the singularity of what happens, a philosophy that can be fed and nourished by the surprise of the unexpected'.<sup>26</sup> But, in order to be able to respond to this need, and thus to resist the pressures of today's world, philosophy must be able to propose a principle of interruption, i.e. 'something which can interrupt this endless regime of circulation'<sup>27</sup> that renders our world fragmentary and illegible. The imperative that contemporary philosophy confronts is that '*there be* such an interruption point', precisely because such a 'point of discontinuity', 'an unconditional point', allows thought to extract itself from the world and to remain in 'confrontation in the world as it is'<sup>28</sup>. And, to the extent that in our world of endless and extremely fast changes, which is due to this speed rendered incoherent, inconsistent, in short, illegible, the logic which is specifically undone there ... the logic of time'<sup>29</sup>, the task of philosophy today, instead of trying in vain to follow the quick pace of the world, is rather to strive for a 'retardation', as Badiou puts it. Hence, philosophy 'must construct a time for thought, which, in the face of the injunction to speed, will constitute a time of its own.'<sup>30</sup> Indeed, it is its slow, and, thus, rebellious thinking that makes it possible for philosophy to establish the fixed point in a world that never ceases to change. One is, therefore, almost tempted to say that, in saving itself, philosophy saves the world too.

Philosophy, in Badiou's view, is a paradoxical turning towards its time, its actuality, a turning which involves a curious torsion of the thought of time onto itself. Or, to be even more precise, this torsion that philosophy is a turning of time onto itself, a return of time to itself. Put otherwise, to evade the powerlessness of thought, philosophy turns towards the past, not, of course, in order to save it, but rather to produce a new kind of the present – a paradoxical endeavour as it is a matter of producing within the worldly present a new present – while relating to something that has already disappeared, namely the event. Being nothing but an act that separates truth from opinions, yet capable

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26 Badiou, 2004, pp. 55-56.

27 Badiou, 2004, p. 49.

28 Badiou, 2004, p. 40.

29 Badiou, 2004, p. 51.

30 Badiou, 2004, p. 51.

nonetheless of producing some unpredictable, non-controllable effects in the world, philosophy is not allowed to make mistakes. This is why, in a sense, philosophy shares the destiny of the faithful subject. It has to take, as its compass, the real that assigns it its conditions: truth procedures and their destiny in the current times.

Taking up Hegel's metaphor of Minerva's owl that takes flight only at nightfall, in short, when all is said and done, Badiou claims that philosophy as such always comes after the fact. Indeed, by coming 'after', philosophy is constitutively anachronistic in its own time. This may explain why, for Badiou, the central task of philosophy is to draw up a balance-sheet of its own time. To think its time means, for Badiou, that philosophy has to detect points of interruption which mark a break with the previous paradigm of thinking, and, as a consequence, inaugurate a new time, and start a new counting of time. More specifically, philosophy could be designed as an attempt to isolate, to extract the real of its own time or, to paraphrase Badiou, literally 'wrench time from time',<sup>31</sup> in order to reveal those unheard of possibilities of which time, because of the constraints of reality, did not know that it was capable, to identify those points at which the impossibility of a given time turns into a possibility of some unheard of novelty, allowing for a definitely new beginning.

Yet in an interview with *Le Magazine Littéraire*, following the publication of his book, which was, as its very title signals, *Le Siècle (The Century)*, conceived as a philosophical balance-sheet of the past century, Badiou introduces a new definition of philosophy's task in a striking and at the same time enigmatic fashion, by stating that, by definition, philosophy comes 'after', after the fact, yet despite, or more precisely because of this, as philosophers we also have 'the possibility to come before, if we assume that, by means of the categories that we forge, something of that of which we have been belated contemporaries, is gathered together, brought back to life'.<sup>32</sup> By transmitting to the younger generation something truly new that its time has produced, philosophy, although coming after, nevertheless tries to come before. In so doing, philosophy would 'remain an eternal and irreplaceable witness of the manner in which it has received and sheltered something which has also disappeared. Philosophy will have thus changed the

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31 Badiou, 2007, p. 21.

32 Badiou, 2005a, p. 96.

disappearance into the possibility of an appearance.<sup>133</sup>

By being intrinsically late, by coming 'after', that is, once the event that has inaugurated a truth procedure has already disappeared, i.e. by situating itself in this delay, lagging behind, philosophy is capable of wrenching, extracting from its own time, something more in the times than time itself, the instant of 'eternity' as the *objet a*, a bit of the real that remains irreducible to chronological time. Yet the price to be paid by philosophy, insofar as it is true to its task – to identify the real of its own time, is that its own gesture is displaced, ex-centric, ultimately anachronistic, in relation to its time. But it is precisely on the basis of its ex-centricity, I would argue, that the philosophical gesture of 'seizing truths' is a paradoxical 'after' that is, at the same time, 'before'. Perhaps the most surprising short-circuit Badiou brings up in his engagement with the structural delay of philosophy, this temporality proper to philosophy qua philosophy, can be found in a paradoxical cleavage of philosophy: insofar as it seeks to think its time, philosophy is forced to anticipate 'to some extent the welcoming and sheltering of these fragile procedures in thought... of which the mere possibility is still not firmly established',<sup>34</sup> and it, philosophy, is necessarily divided between a 'balance-sheet' and a manifesto, an announcement of the future orientation of thought. What becomes of philosophy as conditioned by its conditions in worldless times? How can philosophy continue to operate in accordance with the task it has set for itself, without the possible overstepping of the limits imposed on it, that is, as a philosophy 'under the condition', and thus usurping the place of one of its conditions?

While it is true that '[p]hilosophy does not itself produce any effective truth,' by recognising and seizing novelties as truths, but first of all by announcing that they exist, philosophy 'turns time toward eternity – since every truth, as a generic infinity, is eternal'<sup>35</sup>. One can see now more clearly in what way philosophy is concerned with the question of the existence of truths. It is not philosophy that makes a truth eternal. What philosophy can do, however, is to make 'disparate truths compossible'. In so doing, it 'states the being of the time in

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33 Badiou, 2005a, p. 96

34 Badiou, 1999, p. 38.

35 Badiou, 2005b, p. 14.

which it operates as the time of the truths'.<sup>36</sup> That there be truths is an imperative shared by philosophy and its conditions. Indeed, it points to a co-responsibility of the conditions of philosophy, which produce truths, and philosophy, which 'under the condition that there are truths, is duty-bound to make them manifest'<sup>37</sup>. Arguably, there is no problem to heroize the present when something radically new takes place. It is, however, more difficult to extract something eternal from worldless times. Hence, it remains an open question how the mobilisation of philosophy during intervallic, 'empty' times, such as ours, is to be thought.

In intervallic times, i.e. periods in which nothing new (seems to) take(s) place, philosophy, in particular one which defines itself as a philosophy of the event, that is, a philosophy which, because it cannot directly create novelty, or force the events, but can only record its traces in thought; philosophy which is, ultimately, under the condition of its conditions, seems to lose its reason d'être. What, in fact, could be the task of a philosophy which is "under the condition of its conditions" if these conditions seem to be unable to produce something new? In effect, in 'atonic' worlds, the duty of philosophy may well remain to think at 'the breach in time'<sup>38</sup>. However, insofar as, in worldless times, such a 'breach in time', a bifurcation of time, or the co-existence of two, heterogeneous times, historical time and eventual time or the time of truths, is obliterated, practically invisible, to the point that the inhabitants of such a world are unable to even conceive of the possibility of another world, the role and the importance of philosophy seems to increase. If philosophy is not eternally condemned to 'come after', that is, to make a balance-sheet of its time, but is also required to be contemporary with its time, coming from a thinker committed to a philosophy 'under conditions', cannot but come as a surprise. Does it mean that philosophy should be descending in the playground previously assigned to its "conditions" in order to prove that it is indeed capable of being contemporary with its time, that it can actively contribute to the creation of the present, this being the only time of truths?

The difficulty that philosophy faces today is that, precisely as the

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36 Badiou, 2005b, p. 14.

37 Badiou, 2005b, p. 15.

38 Badiou, 1999, p. 38.

owl of Minerva, that is to say, coming "after" the event, it must prove that it can also be truly contemporary to its time, that is to say, capable of taking part, participating, together with 'its' conditions, in bringing new truths to life. The very formulation of this task has some major repercussions for the definition of the role of philosophy. Indeed, does Badiou's canonical definition of the task of philosophy allow for such an extension, making it possible for philosophy to legitimately take on this additional burden in intervallic times? It appears as if philosophy, in order to survive in worldless times, while searching for a remedy for the current illegibility of the world and the subsequent disorientation of its inhabitants, is itself forced to step out of its self-imposed role and to take upon itself the role of one of its (nowadays) de-activated conditions. Generally speaking, the task proper to philosophy is to isolate the moments of 'eternity' by drawing up the famous balance-sheet for its time because, for Badiou, 'every world is capable of producing within itself its own truth'.<sup>39</sup> If philosophy is summoned today to make a wager à la Pascal, this is because, in our time of disorientation and wordlessness, only philosophy, insofar as its task is to isolate the moments of the "eternal", that is to say, a sort of trans-historicity, thereby implying that these novelties which emerge as an exception to the law of its concrete historical situation are at the same time trans-situational and trans-historical, can claim that these "eternal truths" can be brought to life, resuscitated in a new present of another world or another time.

It is at this juncture that we can return to Badiou's enigmatic formula that philosophy comes at once both 'after' and 'before'. Borrowing Shakespeare's term, the time of philosophy could be characterised as a time out of joint. In effect, situated in-between events and their truth procedures, thus, at once the follower and the precursor of truths, philosophy thus seems to embody the out-of-jointedness of the present of the eventually created truths. Philosophy is 'normally' supposed to come 'after' its conditions, by providing a space in which the compossibility of these heterogeneous trajectories of singular truth procedures can be inscribed. However, under exceptional circumstances, in a crisis situation, situations in which what is at stake is the orientation in thought, and, consequently, in existence, philosophy's task is to provide a diagnosis of its time by characterising its time as the time of worldlessness, which entails, at the subjective

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39 Badiou, 2009a, p. 8.

level, a profound disorientation. While it may well be true that '[e]very world is capable of producing within itself its own truth', as Badiou claims, in the meantime, while no new truth seems to be emerging, philosophy should propose, as a remedy for the current confusion and disorientation, a balance sheet of the time in which truth procedures have produced something new, new eternal truths. At the same time Badiou claims, more ambitiously, that on the basis of the given balance-sheet, '[p]hilosophy has no other legitimate aim except to help find the new names that will bring into existence the unknown world that is only waiting for us because we are waiting for it'.<sup>40</sup> This, of course, is not to be understood in the sense that philosophy should assume the task of ordering, but rather in the sense of a wager of philosophy, or, more properly, the wager that philosophy itself is namely nothing other than a belief that contemporary philosophy is 'capable of enveloping today's actions and drawing strength, tomorrow, from what these actions will produce'<sup>41</sup>.

But this is only possible if philosophy presents itself today as a paradoxical articulation, or a knotting of a balance-sheet of the past and a manifesto enveloping the precarious present of the emerging novelties in a fiction of the future of this nascent present. Just like avant-garde's proclamations, philosophy, today, must provide formulas to 'invent a future for the present' of truths, without being 'certain whether the thing itself is already present'<sup>42</sup>. Indeed, it is such an 'envelopment of a real present in a fictive future'<sup>43</sup> that can reveal that the present is a fabrication, a production, but precisely for that reason, the 'recognition of the fabrication of a present can rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art'<sup>44</sup>. In light of this, it is no accident that philosophy, when faced with the task of enveloping something that is in the process of emerging, far from striving for a kind of pre-evental forcing, privileges the form of manifestos in those in-between, intervallic periods, when 'wheels turn idly', in the 'empty time' that is incapable of producing something new or worthy of thought, those times in which 'nothing happens' and when it seems that philosophy itself has no

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40 Badiou, 2003.

41 Badiou, 2009a, p. 7.

42 Badiou, 2007, pp. 138-139.

43 Badiou, 2007, p. 139.

44 Badiou, 2007, p. 140.

raison d'être.

This is crucial to solving the problem of the survival of philosophy in worldless times. In trying to be contemporary by being non-contemporary, the task of contemporary philosopher remains 'to be of one's time, through an unprecedented manner of not being in one's time'.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, philosophy must show reserve: its immediate goal is not to change the world, but our way of thinking. Ultimately, the task of philosophy today should be to strive, in the words of Badiou, for a "revolution in mind", one that would help restore thought's capacity for action. For Badiou, this requires a specific subjective attitude, one that he has himself discerned in Pascal and what I propose to call the stance of a militant anachronism.

Thus, it is precisely in turning to the present conjecture, qualified as an intervallic, 'empty time,' in which nothing new emerges, that philosophy finds itself assigned a new supplementary task. For the present to have a future, the question of the present must be posed in terms of a paradoxical obligation to the past. How are we to understand this obligation to the past? For Badiou, whenever there is no present, when the present is lacking, this necessarily entails the lack of the past too, the latter being reduced to a mere mortifying commemoration. A living past, a past that is genealogically linked to the present presupposes, however, that there be a present, itself linked or pointing towards the future. Yet, as Badiou never tires of reminding us, the concern of the obligation of the past is always the present and, by way of consequence, the future of this present. Badiou's thesis here is namely that with the obliteration of the eventual past, by means of its negation, obscuring or criminalisation, it is the present, the actuality, which also disappears. The issue of the transmission of the past, of its restoration, is at the centre of contemporary preoccupations with the possibility of a change that would mark a clean break with the past and project itself into the future, declaring the advent of a new way of thinking and, consequently, of being.

Why mobilise philosophy? And more specifically, not just any kind of philosophy, but precisely philosophy of the event, a philosophy, to which some major ruptures of its time assign its condition. Setting out from a mixture of hope and conviction, so characteristic of his militant style of philosophising, Badiou claims that, strictly speaking, for philosophy of the event, the new century has not yet truly begun.

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45 Badiou, 2007, p. 21.

At this point, Badiou seems to be conjuring a court-circuit of two, at first glance, contradictory theses: for the new century to finally begin, it is necessary for philosophy to turn to its proper time, to its actuality, as it is: presentless and worldless, a world of a deep confusion and disorientation, too, evidenced in the very fact that, for us, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in its passion for the real, is incomprehensible. At the same time, the truths resulting from the eventual breaks in the 20<sup>th</sup> century constitute the condition, moreover, an active condition, for our transitional event-less period. The question that philosophy must pose at this juncture is therefore the following: What makes it possible for the vacuity of nihilism to continue, how is this vacuity to be determined if it makes its endless continuation possible?

It is precisely at this juncture that Badiou mobilises the power of philosophy: it is contemporary philosophy's duty to uphold the following injunction: 'The new century cannot indefinitely continue in deploying its vacuity. The new century must therefore finally begin.'<sup>46</sup> For Badiou, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while it has undoubtedly brought about some novelties that will remain "for ever," nevertheless it represents a closed sequence in which these innovations were deployed. Hence, the new century, which has hardly begun, cannot pretend to simply continue within the same framework of thought. But if we cannot return to the forms in which the eternal truths of the 20<sup>th</sup> century emerged, it is nevertheless the case that the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Badiou insists, is still very much a part of the active conditions for 21<sup>st</sup> century thought. What, in effect, is still alive of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and immune to the change of the epoch? How, indeed, can we return to the century of the "passion of the real", an affect that our century not only does not share with the past century, but tries to avoid at all costs? How, to return to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the century of events, which is for us literally inconceivable? It is at this point at which the question of transmission as a condition for a new beginning is posed with all urgency that philosophy is called to intervene.

In contrast to the 1960s and 1970s, when the question of the beginning could still animate philosophy, based on the conviction that thought itself is capable of orienting, if not of inaugurating, a new beginning, the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, are marked by a loss of the belief in the very possibility of a new commencement. Today we thus seem to be in a worse position than Mallarmé, who, after the defeat of the event of his time, the Paris

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46 Badiou, 2005c.

Commune, declared: 'There is no Present, no, a present does not exist. Unless the Crowd declares itself.'<sup>47</sup> If we are to follow Badiou, Mallarmé could designate his time as an epoch without a present, to the extent that he established a direct nexus between the presence of the popular subjectivity on the scene of history and the production of the present. Thus, by referring the lack of a present to the absence of the crowd, that is, in Badiou's terms, by positing the eventual rupture as a 'condition for the presence of the present'<sup>48</sup>, Mallarmé announced the beginning of a more or less long period in which emancipatory politics is limited, that is, until the re-appearance of the 'crowd', to 'restricted action'.

While Mallarmé's conclusion that there is no present, because there is no event, does not, however, exclude the possibility that in some unforeseeable future a new event might inaugurate the present that we lack today; for us, even this timid hope must be quenched. The prevailing opinion regarding the new beginning could be summed up as follows: not only did nothing take place but the place, to borrow Mallarmé's celebrated formula, but, more drastically, the current 'shortage' of events, the feeling that there are no more history-breaking events to be expected, is a clear sign that we are living in the times of the end of time, a time which excludes, by definition, the very possibility of something new taking place.

Our era could, then, be designated as an era of amnesia, a peculiar amnesia to be sure, since we are not dealing here simply with the forgetting of some past events whose effects, to paraphrase Lacan, have stopped being written in the present conjecture: it is not merely about forgetting the forgotten. The amnesia of the amnesia is rather an anticipation of the amnesia, a readiness to forget in advance, a programmed amnesia, so to speak. Hence, for us, something is doomed to be forgotten even before it has actually taken place. This anticipated, programmed amnesia is, namely, the ability to wipe out not only what has happened, but to annihilate the very idea of the possibility for something to happen, in short, the ability to erase the possibility of the possible. What is crucial today, however, is not the question: how to restore the traces of the forgotten/effaced past, but rather: how to neutralise our readiness in advance to forget? Briefly put, how to intervene before this bifurcation of time takes place?

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47 Mallarmé, 1976, p. 257.

48 Badiou, 2005b, p. 31.

It is precisely in the present conjecture of the amnesia of the possibility of another world that, for Badiou, the articulation of philosophy's contemporaneity to the question of transmission has attained its central place. It is not a question, here, of merely bridging the temporal gap between the generation of the sixties and the present generation. What is at stake here, is nothing less than the possibility of transmission under the circumstances of contemporary nihilism, a transmission from the 'evental generation', a generation that, in effect, experienced in the 1960s, if only for a brief moment, the possibility of a new beginning in the guise of a categorical departure from the existing state of affairs, to a properly nihilistic generation, marked, not by the event but by its absence, a generation that was literally marked by the nothing, a generation that was under the spell of the dominant ideology, according to which a new beginning is no longer possible. How then can the past beginning be inscribed in such a conjecture in which the gap separating the evental from the nihilistic generation seems to be ineliminable?

The question of transmission is the question of a singular relation to the times, or, more properly, a question of the restitution of the moment of the real that evades all integration into chronological time, into history, a moment of the real insofar as the real is fundamentally trans-historic. In light of this, it could be said that the past, the present, and the future, are less to be understood as chronological categories than as specific subjectivations of time. In this context, the current amnesia of the beginning could be viewed as a peculiar subjectivation of time, a mode of the subjective time, characterised by the erasure of all discontinuity. This principled indistinction between a 'before' and an 'after', that is at the core of the 'amnesic' operation, produces a new temporal figure, that of the present without the future. The amnesia of the beginning, or, rather, of its possibility, is namely a subjectivation of time that denies the event as a clear-cut interruption by inscribing it back into history as one of those things that simply happen. By denying the discontinuity in which the eventness of the event consists, the amnesia of the amnesia not only annihilates the past, but also the future. Not, of course, some abstract future, but the future of the very present, the future of its proper present. It is therefore not enough to say that for an amnesic subject nothing has happened, that the past event is but an illusion. It would be more appropriate to say that for him nothing can happen. And it is only in this sense that it could be said that for an amnesic subject there is no such thing as a beginning or an event. In a

sense, for such a subject everything will go on as before, things will not stop happening for him, for that matter, but nothing that will happen to him could be considered a clear-cut rupture capable of founding a new time and thus inaugurating a new historical epoch.

How can a break, a rupture, be transmitted since it is an experience, an encounter with the real, which precludes all idea of a common denominator between a generation of rupture and a generation of amnesia, an experience that implies the affirmation of the irreducible distance between the two generations? How, then, is it possible to insist on the possibility, necessity even, of transmission? What can be the 'object' of such transmission if the emphasis is put on discontinuity rather than on continuity? Indeed, what is at issue in such transmission cannot be simply the establishment of the continuity between the past and the present. In contrast to history, which, in order to ensure temporal continuity, is precisely immune to all breaks, all discontinuity, such transmission aims at wrenching from the times something eternal, to use Foucault's expression, the present's immanent eternity, which cannot be integrated into history, or stored in the archives of memory. Ultimately, what such transmission brings to light is the moment when time is literally suspended, that impossible non-temporal instant before the bifurcation of time into a 'before' and an 'after' takes place, which Badiou qualifies as the 'present without the presence'.

Here, the relation between transmission and the beginning, fundamental in contemporary philosophy, becomes evident, here it also shows its political relevance. For Badiou, it is certain that the evental rupture, alone, establishes the possibility of transmission. To be sure, for there to be a transmission at all, something must have taken place. The beginning is therefore a condition for transmission. Today, however, with the loss of faith in the very possibility of a new beginning, the causal relation between transmission and commencement is inverted. The inversion of the relationship between transmission and commencement has an implication at the level of the restoration of belief in the possibility of a new commencement. Indeed, one might argue that transmission today appears as a first step in the opening of a space for the inscription of a new breach in time, a new beginning to come. From such a perspective, without constituting the sole condition of the possibility of a new commencement, transmission could nonetheless be considered an operation that opens up the possibility of the beginning precisely there where the beginning seems to be impossible.

Amnesia and transmission are, thus, two drastically

heterogeneous, ultimately mutually exclusive relations to the past and to time in general. While amnesia aims to re-inscribe within history that which cannot be inscribed into it, an unforeseeable, non-derived interruption, transmission is forced to break with history in order to save something of the past, but in so doing it secures the present for the sake of the future.

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