

An Encounter with Alain Badiou at Beijing University

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I met Alain Badiou in China at Peking University in October 1975. In reality, Badiou had never been to China before, and that meeting was the ideal prelude to a long and deep friendship. It was a stroke of luck, but also a necessary logic. I had just begun my studies at the Department of Philosophy at Beida, Peking University. We were a small group of foreign students, including a Canadian classmate who had *Théorie de la contradiction* in her hands. She had been to Paris and found it at FNAC, then the leading bookshop in the French capital. She passed the book to me and Alessandro Russo, also a classmate, saying with a disconsolate air, 'I don't understand it at all'. I still have the copy she used as scrap paper to write addresses on. For us, however, the book was immediately exciting, challenging, but crystal clear. It was the right book at the right time.

We had both chosen the Department of Philosophy, then one of only three options available to foreign students, along with History and Literature. I had graduated in Chinese Language and Literature from the University of Venice Ca' Foscari with a thesis on the main magazine of the May Fourth Movement of 1919, *Xin Qingnian* (New Youth). It would have been more logical to choose Literature or History. Moreover, I had no specialist training in philosophy, except for private lessons from my brother, who had written his thesis on Sartre, and some exchanges with his wife, who had written her thesis on Merleau-Ponty. In short, I had a smattering of 'family' knowledge of contemporary French philosophy, as well as having read a little Althusser, because he recognised Mao as a great philosopher, albeit with some critical reservations, the importance of which I underestimated at the time. I knew very little about Badiou. What little I knew was that he had been part of the Althusserian school, from which he had later distanced himself, but I did not understand exactly why, and he had written some texts on mathematical logic that were far removed from my intellectual horizon.

Théorie de la contradiction, just published by Maspero in the 'Collection Yenan', a very Maoist name, was in tune with what I was about to begin studying at the Department of Philosophy at Beida. I had chosen philosophy because I felt that at that moment it was the most direct way to get in touch with the Chinese intellectual scene, and also because a French friend who had studied there the year before had spoken enthusiastically about a very lively atmosphere. The History and the Literature Departments, on the other hand, seemed more rigid and bureaucratic. There had been little interesting new literature in China for many years (only later did I discover that there was some valuable underground poetry that would emerge a few years later). History was halfway between interesting developments, such as a re-evaluation of legalist political thought, and a kind of block on the entire political history of the 20th century after May 4th, because some CCP leaders had been the subject of drastic, but as yet undefined, criticism.

So, the Philosophy Department at Beida was the best choice for me, and I fully agreed with Alessandro, who had no doubts about it. The encounter with *Théorie de la contradiction* was electrifying for both of us. We were to take courses on Marxist philosophy, with particular reference to classical German philosophy and, of course, Mao's philosophy, both the theory of knowledge and dialectics. Holding in our hands the book of a contemporary philosopher, already known as a prominent figure in France's intellectual and political landscape, which focused on a central theme in Mao's thought, immediately seemed to us an exciting broadening of our horizons. We encountered a French philosophical thought that originated in 1968, at the very moment we were studying philosophy in China during the Cultural Revolution.

In *Théorie de la contradiction*, one could sense the tone of a political activist (the 'Collection Yenan' was published by the political organisation founded by Badiou himself, the UCF-ML), but also the style of an original philosopher, who brought into play the most original innovations in French thought of those years, such as the 'return to Freud' by Lacan: primary process and secondary process, were widely quoted, for example. But there were also trenchant aphorisms: 'if things do not change, it is men who die'.

We studied it and also discussed it in university courses with our Chinese professors, in a context of great intellectual vivacity. How false and slanderous is the denigration of the Chinese intellectual and political climate of the mid-1970s after the capitalist restoration in China! Indeed, who knows what developments might have ensued from the innovations we encountered at the Beida Department of Philosophy, which were made even more stimulating by our encounter with Badiou's philosophy.

What made the atmosphere at Beida's Department of Philosophy particularly innovative was the presence of the Institute for Research on European Philosophy (*Ouzhou zhexue yanjiusuo*), to which some of our teachers belonged and with which we were in fairly regular contact. We even accepted an invitation to give two lectures in Chinese to the researchers at the Institute on European Philosophy. What youthful recklessness, but also what enthusiasm, and what encouragement from our teachers, who certainly knew much more than we did, but let us speak as if we were their colleagues. This is another example of the intellectual and pedagogical climate of the time.

In any case, Alessandro and I presented a two-part lecture at the Institute for Philosophical Research on the reception of Mao's philosophy in Europe, one on *Théorie de la contradiction* and the other on *Contradiction et surdétermination* by Althusser. Another French student, François Gipouloux, gave a report on Sartre in 1968. The Canadian students (who came from American universities) chose Wittgenstein and Popper instead. There was both a political and a philosophical division between analytical and continental philosophers.

But the innovations of the Institute for Research in European Philosophy were not limited to the cordiality with which young foreign students were welcomed. There were at least two aspects that made it such an important philosophical centre at that time. First of all, the Institute's opening was strongly supported by Mao, who also decisively influenced the appointment of the director and deputy director. Well, one detail that no one could ever believe in the climate of 'total denial' that has covered Maoist politics for half a century is the criterion by which Mao chose the Institute's main leaders. He expressly wanted them to be two great non-Marxist scholars. Not just any two scholars, because one was the Chinese translator of *Sein und Zeit*, the other a student of Schlick, a leading exponent of the Vienna School. It should be noted that the choice fell on the two main trends in European philosophy, 'continental' and 'analytical', of which Mao was clearly aware.

But why not Marxists? Because Chinese Marxist philosophers had been trained in the Soviet Union and therefore had strong prejudices against European philosophy, particularly classical German philosophy, which in Stalinist doctrine was classified as idealism and therefore foreign to the framework of 'historical materialism and dialectical materialism'. The Institute for Research on European Philosophy, on the other hand, paid particular attention to classical German philosophy, thanks to another great philosopher, Zhang Shiyong, whose memorable lectures on Hegel we were fortunate enough to attend, and who was another element in our encounter with Badiou. In fact, in that very year, Badiou was engaged in a long-distance dialogue with Zhang Shiyong, which was published the following year in the last volume of the Yanan Collection's philosophical series, *Le noyau rationnel de la dialectique hégélienne*. The translation was by Joel Bellassen, who had been a student at Beida's Department of Philosophy the year before us and had warmly recommended the intellectual qualities of its teachers.

This dialogue between Badiou and Zhang covered philosophical themes of great significance, both because it concerned a monumental work such as *Science of Logic* and because the 'rational kernel' had been, since Marx, the *vexata quaestio* of the whole of Marxist philosophy. The two philosophers converged on the problem of a new reading of Hegel. For Badiou, it was a question of overcoming the horizon of a phenomenological reading that had prevailed in France in previous decades. This text contained *in nuce* the orientation of Badiou's reading of Hegel, which he would develop in the elaboration of his philosophical system. For Zhang Shiyong, the problem was how to move away from the Stalinist reading, positively re-evaluating Hegel's idealism, which he considered a response to the 'vulgar materialism' of the philosophers of the French Revolution. In his lectures at Beida, he reminded us that Lenin not only had great esteem for Hegel, but also emphasised the active value of the Absolute Spirit. Although Zhang did not quote him directly, the

thorny problem posed by Mao's philosophy to the Stalinist conception was clearly visible in the background when he said, 'Spirit transforms into matter, matter transforms into spirit'.

However, even though we were in the Philosophy Department of China's most important university during the last two years of the Cultural Revolution, studying the philosophical texts of Engels and Lenin, as well as Mao, our professors were very careful not to overlap philosophical and political concepts; if anything, they discouraged our 'youthful' tendency to do so. On the other hand, as regards the relationship between philosophy and politics, the orientation they emphasised was what Badiou later called the 'political condition' of philosophy. Obviously, they did not use that concept, and it was only retrospectively, thanks to Badiou, that we understood the attitude towards politics that we saw in our professors in the Department of Philosophy at the time.

For example, when Zhang Shiyong re-evaluated Hegel's idealism, he considered it 'conditional' on the outcome of the defeat of the French Revolution. Similarly, in another course we were taking on Lenin's *Materialism and Empiriocriticism* (we had to read it in Chinese too!), Feng Qi, also a great specialist in European philosophy, emphasised that at the origin of that text was Lenin's concern to counter the tendency towards the dissolution of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in the aftermath of the defeat of the 1905 revolution. In both cases, an essential driver of the philosophical concept was the 'political condition'.

There is certainly much more to say about that 'first encounter' with Badiou at Beida, but even more about what I learned thanks to the privilege of being able to follow closely, on the basis of a personal friendship, the construction and development of a great contemporary philosophical system. To limit myself to one crucial aspect, the category of 'conditions of philosophy' involves the singularity of each of the 'truth procedures' as Badiou calls them, that is, the different modes of rationality in the fields not only of politics but also of science, art and love.

That conception, a crucial turning point in contemporary philosophy, was for me a factor of intellectual liberation, which gave a great impetus to my study and translation of contemporary Chinese poetry. It prompted me to read that poetry in its singularity of thought, or as the Chinese poets themselves said, as an 'independent intellectual space', without having to inscribe it in a 'worldview'. Moreover, in the 1990s, while formulating his theory of the 'conditions' of philosophy, Badiou remained critical of a tendency to suture poetry and philosophy together, present above all in Heidegger's conception of poetry as the original source of thought.

In translating and presenting in Italy the new Chinese poets known as *menglong*, 'obscure' (in reality very clear, as when Lucretius wrote "obscura de re tam lucida pango carmina"), I was therefore supported by both these aspects of Badiou's philosophical position towards poetry. In other words, I cultivated a great admiration for the singular depth of

these authors' poetic thought and the care taken not to seek a fusion with philosophical thought. A fusion that at the time seemed to me to serve as a substitute for a supposed 'end of philosophy', which was quite fashionable at the time. With regard to the formula of 'poetic thinking,' which various friends suggested to me as the main way to read poetry, I proposed that the wave of new Chinese poetry that had emerged underground in the 1970s was rather 'thinking poetry'.

Furthermore, the category of 'condition', by focusing on the singularity of the tasks of philosophical speculation, can be said to have itself performed the function of 'condition' for the creation and development of the great philosophical system set out in the monumental trilogy *L'être et l'événement* (which also includes *Logiques des mondes* and *L'immanence des vérités*). These are challenging but compelling readings, fortunately supported by some slim volumes that summarise the crucial points of his philosophical system with great didactic dynamism. I am referring here to the first and second *Manifeste pour la philosophie*, as well as *L'éthique*, a text that I was so passionate about that I immediately undertook its Italian translation. Ethics was placed there as a link between ontology and logic, and in fact marked the transition between *L'être et l'événement* and *Logiques des mondes*. Breaking with the moralistic vision of a 'general ethics' (which at the time was the now-outdated 'human rights' and 'respect for differences'), Badiou reformulated the question in terms of an 'ethics of', that is, an ethics of truths. This helped me to understand why Paul Celan said "the truth of poetry is its pure and simple being available".

The third part of the trilogy, although centred on a dizzying dialogue on 20th-century mathematics, proved to be unvaluable resource for my reading and translation of the new generation of migrant worker poets in China. I presented a reading of it at the collective seminar on *L'immanence des vérités*, proposing that the Chinese worker-poets seek an infinity of poetic truth, rejecting all finitude (economic, state, ideological and even religious) by which they are '*recouvert*' and made invisible in contemporary China. As I said at the time, I do not know whether this is a mathematical concept, but when these nomadic proletarians declare that their poetic existence is an 'immense singular number', they act in the light of the immanence of truths.