

Alain Badiou: Philosophy, History, and the Transformations of the Dialectic

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Once it was once contended that “*dialectic* is one of those ancient sciences that have been the most misjudged in the metaphysics of the moderns, and in general also by popular philosophy, both ancient and recent.” It was, for example, frequently “been regarded as an *art*, as if it rested on a subjective *talent* and did not belong to the objectivity of the concept.”¹ With this conceptual complaint, Hegel asserts that dialectic is not just gimmickry, not just a bag of tricks, even though modern man is prone to assume so. It is just too detached from our every-day experience and at the same too difficult to be systematized. What is it then? It must be something like art, a form of practice that ultimately amounts to subjects performing some tricks well. In short, the modern seem to think that dialectic is sophistry, at best.

But, this was Hegel’s position, dialectic is not sophistry – even though it might take something from sophistry and make it work differently – and it is also not merely subjective. Rather it is a form of objective and conceptual thought, it is a form in which the concept as such operates that after its Greek period needed a proper modern reinvention. To reinvent and transform the dialectic – within and against modernity’s problematic initial reception of it – did not only mean to profoundly rethink negativity – that which is not. It also meant to on the one hand historicize dialectics itself by historicizing how that which is not is a determining factor for the very form of thought; and it meant, on the other hand, to dialectically formalize the very concept of history or historicity, even of that of dialectics.

Philosophy therefore was inherently linked to dialectics. This is what not only allowed to formulate a concept of history or historicity – and thus the concept of transformation or change – , but to even historicize dialectics itself. “How to dialectically account for the historical transformations of the dialectic?”, now started to become a philosophically pressing question. For what is it that is not in the dialectic if the dialectic is a formal system of that which is not? How to formalize that which escapes dialectical formalization?

Alain Badiou, by far one of the best known French philosophers alive today, has made one of the most monumental proposals of how to reply to these questions. His reinvention of philosophy in times of its apparent uselessness, self-imposed weakness or outright demise has been dedicated, courageous and principled throughout. But Badiou did not place philosophy’s renewal simply within the framework of the university discourse. Only in 2025, Badiou ended his seminar of over forty years, which included reflections on current events and their ideological pertinence, discussions of new types of subject-formation as well as dense systematic and philosophical elaborations or logical analyses of symptoms of contemporary capitalism that sought to grasp the present time in the form of thought. Badiou has also not only attempted – probably successfully (in our view) – to reinvent dialectics

and its account of historicity, but also to rearticulate what is philosophy. Already in 2009, with the publication of *Being and Event 3*², he completed the book-appearance of his philosophical system. In stark difference to the mass of thinkers who cannot stop continuing until something, usually death, forces them to, or who insist on philosophy being the discipline of the – ultimately unanswerable – question, he has proven that to think philosophically not only means to think systematically, but also to think with the aim of conceptual completion. Completion here does not at all imply that things have come to an end, rather Badiou's system is one that even reinvents the very understanding of what it means to end and what it is to think things through to the end and to make an end. This led Badiou to formulate a novel concept of the absolute.

This is not only to say that Badiou does not leave things unresolved³ – even though this is true and it marks a difference to many of his predecessors or contemporaries (just recall the names of Althusser, Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Lacoue-Labarthe, Nancy and many others). The reason for this particular difference can certainly be linked to Badiou's unashamed reaffirmation of the idea of the philosophical system, which seemed and seems monstrous and outdated to many. But it is that very systematicity that enables specific forms of knotting concepts together, be they being, non-being and thought; or being, subject, truth to produce elaborate conceptual consequences.

That Badiou reinvented not only dialectics and thereby historicity – by periodizing dialectical thought itself – but also the very form of philosophy is, obviously, proof enough that he is a thinker that needs to be appreciated and evaluated on his own terms. Neither a Hegelian, Sartreian or Lacanian – but a peculiar self-declared Platonist, a proponent of a Platonism that he first had to invent so that he could affirm it.

However, Badiou does not start from scratch – he is a historically attuned thinker. Which is why he takes another step from where we seemed to previously have encountered an impasse. An impasse of philosophy – thus of forms of dialectics and their account of historicity – needs to be understood and formalized properly to then be tackled. This is why Badiou, from the very beginning of his conceptual labour, was astutely aware of the historical – and philosophical – conjuncture his thought was placed in and of the impasses which his system-aspiration had to pass through.

This is not to say that Badiou is a historicist or just a historical materialist. Already in the late 1980s, he formulated harsh critiques of the obsession with historical contexts and of the prevalent identification of philosophy with its own history that led many postmodernists, Marxists, deconstructivists, natural scientists and psychoanalytically inspired thinkers to align themselves with a problematic form of asserting an end, the end of philosophy.

Against such willing and self-incurred acceptance of conceptual defeat, Badiou endorsed a form of affirmative forgetting of philosophy's apparent deadlocks and its historical limitations and dared to begin again: by directly addressing the impasses of the historical conjuncture and by transforming the very ontology of these impasses. It meant to take another step in a direction that seemed to lead nowhere and to force an opening where there seemed to be nothing but a wall or piles of ruins.

Is Badiou thus a peculiar thinker of reinventing (also the concept and operation of) sublation? His system clearly – and from its beginning – reworks and reinvents the category of negation and with it the very concepts of dialectics. By unfolding the idea that negativity knows not only different forms but forms that cannot be derived from one another, Badiou sought to articulate the consequences of his creation, an affirmative dialectic. This never did – as a common misperception has it – simply give precedence to affirmation over negativity. Rather affirmation becomes a particular form of putting negativity to work. Applying this very idea to the attempt of systematizing (the forms of) negativity itself, Badiou once noted that Plato created the thought of negation that we call dialectics, Hegel systematized it and he, Badiou, transformed it.

What does this grandiose and systematic transformation and reinvention amount to? What do we have on our hands if we have a complete account of a novel – now properly materialist – dialectic? This last question is especially pressing, as a materialist dialectic is a dialectic of constitutive incompleteness. Is there a finally found complete form of logically conceiving of historical incompleteness? A matheme of historicity? Do we here encounter a relationship between Badiou and a peculiar form of (non-)sublation?

We invited a diverse array of thinkers to respond to these questions. In the following you will read what some of them replied.

With this issue of “Crisis and Critique” we bring together a group of well-known readers of Badiou and new voices, of those who have been skeptical at times and those who have been rather dogmatic. Our aim is to celebrate the achievement of a thinker whose extraordinary endeavor can hardly be underestimated. At a public talk – we believe in Belgium – Badiou once declared the success of his philosophical enterprise and stated “Philosophy is me (la philosophie, c’est moi)”. This issue of “Crisis and Critique” seeks to celebrate philosophy by asking: what is “Badiou” the name of?

1 Hegel 2010, p. 742.

2 Badiou 2022.

3 But it is crucial that Badiou emphasized over and over again that this does not mean that his system solved all problems; however it provides the means to do so. Therein his system can be seen to have another similarity to Hegel's.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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