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A New Dawn for Politics. Alain Badiou. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2022. 145 pp

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As Badiou notes in the Preface, this book assembles various texts written between 2016 and 2020. While Badiou's framing of their commonality is somewhat broad — they all aim to “talk about the present ideological and political situation” (vii) — the book does indeed succeed at delivering a unified whole. Badiou builds this whole from two parts, the first taking a long-term or “bird's eye view” of different epochs (viii), the second examining up close several recent political movements. Badiou's goal here is unashamedly Platonist: to “prescribe what needs to be thought (the logic of Ideas) and done (the logic of activism) in order to bring about what I regard as, quite simply, the Good.” (ix) Although he does not say so here, we can surmise from the book as a whole that bringing about the Good involves prescribing what he calls the Communist Idea as the guiding principle for a new internationalist politics that would involve the global proletariat as well as significant sections of the middle class.

By way of my own preface, I would like to acknowledge that, apart from some of his occasional writing and the famous “Communist Hypothesis” essay, I am quite unacquainted with Badiou's philosophical oeuvre, around which an aura of mystique seems to hover. While I cannot speak to his other works, this volume is extremely clear, including incisive analyses of contemporary ideology and politics. As such, it would appear to provide a useful entry point to his thought, which I am now intrigued to explore in more detail. Now to the book itself.

The reader accustomed to periodizations offered by various critical thinkers might expect Badiou's ‘bird's eye view’ to rehearse a familiar story of social transformation from feudalism to various forms of capitalism. Refreshingly, Badiou claims that contemporary capitalism is but the latest form of the Neolithic era that began “four or five thousand years” ago (7). What distinguishes this overarching social form are three pillars: “private property, which concentrates enormous wealth in the hands of tiny oligarchies, the family, in which wealth is passed on via inheritance, and the state, which protects both property and family by means of armed force.” (8) Given that this “millennial order...values only competition and hierarchy and tolerates the misery of billions of human beings,” the political task before us, according to Badiou, is to exit the Neolithic by way of communism, which is simply the “fine name” for that which negates the Neolithic triad of private property, the family, and the state (10-11).

Interestingly, by situating contemporary capitalism within a millennial Neolithic epoch, Badiou does not dispense entirely with the concept of modernity. Rather, modernity “stands for the exit from tradition,” a three centuries long process that would “sweep away forms of organization that had lasted for millennia.” (13) In these earlier social forms, roles and responsibilities had been “coded and symbolized in hierarchical form” (17). Now, the exit from tradition through capitalism has left only what “Marx calls ‘the icy water of egotistical calculation’” (19) thus bringing about a “gigantic crisis in the symbolic organization of humanity” (17). Against the “false contradiction” that suggests that our only options are modernity structured in terms of the liberal democracy and markets, and a reactive traditionalism, Badiou proposes “the invention of an egalitarian symbolism” that would constitute a definitive break from the Neolithic order (21). This “new communism,” as he calls it in a different essay, would “invent a new type of modernity capable of countering capitalist modernity.” (63)

Badiou’s bird’s eye view also takes a geographic scope, in that he refers to recent data that shows half of the world’s population own none of the global wealth, the top 10 percent own 86 percent, and the top 1% own 46% (14). For Badiou this means that Occupy Wall Street’s slogan “we are the 99%” rings false, precisely because so many members of Western societies that the movement claims to represent in fact fall into the category between the top 10 percent and the bottom half of the global population, owning 14 percent of global wealth (15). This group, while distinct from the “ruling aristocracy” of the top 10 percent, “provide globalized capitalism with its petty-bourgeois band of supporters, the so-called ‘middle classes’ without whom the ‘democratic’ order would have no chance of surviving.” (15) The only way for the “courageous young people of Wall Street” to represent more than “a handful of people” and avoid disappearing into obscurity, would have been for them to trace a “political diagonal” with the 50 percent (16). Indeed, in a later chapter, Badiou claims that the “middle class is now the decisive class in terms of political determination. It represents the greatest number and it serves to defend the capitalist order.” (31) What he calls “real politics” would consist of attempting “to induce a certain segment of the middle class to come onto the side of the masses of poor people” (41).

Badiou claims that the dominant ideology of this middle class consists of two elements: democratic materialism and conservative materialism. The first refers to their acceptance of domination by capitalist oligarchs in exchange for limited rights and freedoms, including a form of democracy that offers a “channel to complain, rant, criticize” and vote “provided this has no noticeable effect on the general form of society” (33). The second element, conservative materialism, captures the “middle-class’s desperate need to be reassured of its status, and above all, not to be confused with the poor masses.” (35) In fact, the existence of Left and Right in politics reflects the “ambivalence of the middle class,” caught between these two forms of materialism (35). As such, the “political field of ‘democracies’ is not strictly speaking that of an ideological struggle, because there are not really two different ideologies at play here.” (36) Indeed, where there is only the consensus of capitalo-parliamentarianism, Badiou claims, “there is no politics.” (47)

This is why Badiou claims that a real politics would involve forging ties between the middle class and the bottom 50 percent of humanity, and the invention of an ideology that would genuinely contradict the dominant materialism. Strikingly, this would refuse to go along with the forms of materialism approved by the oligarchy — “the electoral bazaar and genuflection before the freedom to assent” (37) — which, following Marx, “amounts to nothing more than ‘parliamentary cretinism.’” (37) Rather than give up on democracy, however, Badiou suggests that a new materialism (i.e. in opposition to what he calls “state materialism”) would disjoin the democratic from the conservative elements of the dominant ideology (43) and turn “the Idea of Equality” — in other words, the Communist Idea — “into a materialist power” (43). Badiou’s emphasis on equality might seem to some as out of keeping with the Marxist tradition. After all, in the Critique of the Gotha Program, Marx does not call for an equal distribution of resources, but distribution based on need. Yet by the Idea of Equality, Badiou means a set of more familiar Marxist principles, such as “the collectivization of resources, the effective disappearance of inequalities, the recognition of differences with equal subjective rights, and, ultimately, the decline of separate state authorities.” (21) Indeed, later he identifies the Idea of Equality with the absence of a ruling oligarchy (43).

Apart from the negation of the Neolithic triad of private property, family, and the state, elsewhere Badiou articulates the Communist Idea in terms of four points: 1) the organization of collective life “around something other than private property and profit;” 2) the rejection of specialization and the division of labor in favor of the polymorphous worker; 3) the commitment that we can organize “collective life without reference to identitarian closed sets such as nations, languages, religions, and customs”; and 4) the gradual dismantlement of the “state as a separate power with a monopoly on violence” (67). This internationalism ties in with the subject of the final essay in the collection, concerning the invention of a world of living subjects. While Badiou recognizes that “these four points practically make up the definition of communism as we find it in Marx and other nineteenth century thinkers,” it also explains the failure of state socialism in the twentieth century: the Soviet revolution focused almost entirely on the first point, while in Badiou’s estimation, the Chinese Cultural Revolution addressed points 2 and 4 (69).

Badiou argues that while the Gilets Jaunes movement arose in France against the background of the inability of the ruling class to maintain the subservience of the middle class, their movement ultimately demanded simply an increase in pay rather than an anti-capitalist alternative (84). Moreover, like other recent movements — he mentions again Occupy Wall Street, as well as the Arab Spring, riots in Greece, the *indignados*, and Nuit Debout — the Gilets Jaunes was based on a “negative unity” alone, in the sense that it did not rally people around a positive proposition, such as that of the Communist Idea.

Now, it might be objected that this Communist Idea simply lacks support and really just represents the fantasy of philosophy. However, Badiou insists that a “new idea” can give rise “to a new desire.” (67) Sure, the “desire for the West” as he calls it, “prevails over all others, and does so throughout the world,” but this is because Western modernity appears to be the only alternative to traditionalism (66). To counter this, the four points that make up the Communist Idea need to be introduced “wherever there are popular movements or new forms of social organization.” (71) Indeed, Badiou claims that some Gilets Jaunes will likely be aligned with the project of communism, and thus be inclined to support “schools where the laws of capital and what it means to fight them

in the name of a totally different political orientation are taught and discussed with clarity.” (95) He provides the example of the *École des Actes*, where “one can learn simultaneously from the experiences and questions of the popular public, with at its heart the nomadic proletarians (those misnamed ‘migrants’) everything that, in the diverse forms of rationality, is necessary to survive, to speak, to read, to think.” (100) “A federation of schools based on this model will, I believe, be an important step towards the emergence of a new political program.” (101)

Perhaps the most philosophically engaging chapter is the last, in which Badiou argues that there is not one but at least two worlds (the global North and the global South), in response to which we ought to affirm and fulfill the axiom that there is a single world of living subjects. To the extent that there appears to be a single world in the guise of capitalist globalization, this is in fact a “false world” (142), since it amounts merely to “a world of objects and monetary signs, a world of the free circulation of products and flows.” (117) The vast majority of humans are shut out of the relative affluence enjoyed in the global North through the proliferation of borders, while those that are admitted entry are often done so on condition that they integrate into the dominant national culture. This condition, in turn, demonstrates that migrants are viewed as coming from a different world, for if we believed that we shared a common world we would not impose conditions on their stay (123). Migrants are thus “living proof that our democratic and developed world is not what it claims to be, namely the one world of living subjects, since there are women and men in our world who are considered to come from another world.” (124) Such a truly single world of living subjects would allow the “infinity of differences to exist” (135), because the negative mode in which identities are asserted — the defensive, reactionary response to the other — tends to prosper when it is assumed that there are multiple worlds, whereas the axiom of a single world encourages the positive affirmation of individual differences (128).

I would like to raise some critical questions in response to Badiou’s overall arguments, which I find altogether quite persuasive. I am most interested in what “tracing a political diagonal” with the global poor would entail. On one hand, the meaning seems quite clear: building internationalist solidarity with movements of poor

people around the world. What seems to justify the label “diagonal” is that ties are formed across national borders and between communities on different rungs of the global socioeconomic ladder. While this is laudable, my main question concerns how these alliances would act in concert, and in particular, with what set of concrete goals. How does the creation of a numerical majority of the global population (bringing together the half of humanity who lack property and some or all of the middle classes) in favor of the Communist Idea lead to the establishment of communism, given the organized and powerful opposition to it of the oligarchy? Since, according to Badiou, the state upholds private property and the family, forming an unholy trinity of oppression, presumably these movements would need to target and transform states. Having dismissed electoral democracy as mere window-dressing, Communists would need to focus their energies on direct action, strikes, blockades, sabotage, and the like, as well as the construction of new modes of provisioning outside of, or peripheral to the circuits of capital, such as solidarity economies. Yet as important as these practices are, it is not clear why they couldn’t be pursued *alongside* an engagement in electoral politics.

This is especially pertinent given that the outcomes in this arena shape the conditions of non-electoral struggle. For example, if governments erode the right to peaceful protest, then the scope for legal action is significantly narrowed. This in turn could have a profound influence on the capacity of the movement to bring in the less radical members of the middle class. Similarly, labor laws (recognizing collective bargaining, the right to form a union, to strike, and so on), can be supported or eroded by politicians, influencing the strength of the labor movement, which presumably would have some role to play. Finally, the robustness of social protections is not only an indicator of the strength of organized labor; the stability they can provide can also empower citizens to make yet more radical demands on the state, as Albena Azmanova has argued in *Capitalism on Edge*.

In short, Badiou seems to overlook the ways in which, even if no candidate for office espouses the Communist Idea, the decisions they take will nonetheless influence the prospects for the development of communism. Not only that, but turning our backs on electoral politics leaves the field wide open to the forces of the right, which among other things, imperils the rights of women and LGBTQ communities and criminalizes

migrants and the poor. Perhaps in Badiou's five thousand year gaze it does not make a difference whether a Biden or a Trump is elected. But for human beings who experience life in days, months, and years, this hardly seems credible. In the end, Badiou offers an elegant and provocative argument, but his commitment to ideological purity comes across as other-worldly. While it is true that we need to build another world, we must start from the one that we have.