

Alain Badiou.

The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings.

Trans. Gregory Elliot.

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With this essay, Alain Badiou offers a cautious, yet hopeful, reading of recent uprisings in the Mideast and elsewhere, presented through the philosophical and political categories that he has developed in more detail in other works. The discussion is far from narrow, pushing the reader to consider such major philosophical issues as subjectivity and truth, as well as the sweep and direction of history over the last two centuries. While some previous familiarity with Badiou would enrich the reader's experience, the text is generally quite accessible. In fact, it can serve as a brief introduction to the thought of the French philosopher and political activist, whose significant body of work has been rapidly translated over the last few years. Likewise, Verso plainly hopes to attract more than an academic audience for the book, featuring on its cover an eye catching, black clad figure seen against a wall of flames.

In this short text, Badiou takes for granted that an historical period has ended and that there may be an opening for something new—an event that is an occasion for truth, using Badiou's terminology. Rejecting the entirety of what he sees as the Western political and economic establishment's 'official' story--essentially the call for unprecedented austerity--Badiou summarizes his response as follows: First, 'Under the interchangeable rubrics of "modernization," "reform," "democracy," "the West," "the international community," "human rights," "secularism," "globalization" and various others we find nothing but an historical attempt at an unprecedented regression' aiming at the restoration of mid-nineteenth century liberal capitalism and its associated values, while at the same time destroying everything created by 'the workers movement, communism and genuine socialism' between 1860 and 1980 (4, 5). In case the above list of liberal buzzwords were not enough, Badiou makes clear his view that there is 'no' difference between existing right wing governments and 'left wing' ones (14). Secondly, we see 'the first stirrings of a global popular uprising against this regression.' While the era since roughly 1980 is characterized by Badiou as representing an end of a history, the present moment suggests the possibility of a rebirth, i.e., 'the emergence of a capacity, at once destructive and creative, whose aim is to make a genuine exit from the established order.' Badiou provocatively differs from others on the left, suggesting that Frances Fukuyama 'was not wrong: the modern world, having arrived at its complete development and conscious that it is bound to die ... no longer has anything to think about but "The end of History" ' (15). He also differs from those who hold that capitalism has changed in kind. Describing his outlook, Badiou states: 'My position is the exact opposite: contemporary capitalism possesses all the features of classical capitalism ... today's world is exactly the one which, in a brilliant anticipation, a kind of true science fiction, Marx heralded as the full unfolding of the irrational and, in truth, monstrous potentialities of capitalism' (11, 12). Thirdly, for Badiou, the rebirth of History must be 'a rebirth of the Idea ... the idea of Communism' (6). Identifying explicitly as a Marxist, Badiou defines this perspective as 'The organized knowledge of the political means required to undo existing society and finally realize an egalitarian, rational figure of collective organization for which the name is "communism"' (9).

At the center of the book is an account of the kinds of riots (immediate, latent, and historical) that may mark the rebirth of history. He begins with an account of the 'Immediate riot.' Less

significant than other forms, it is the more common form, nearly always occurring ‘in the wake of a violent episode of state coercion’ (22). Usually consisting of young people, but always ‘restricted to the site where its participants live,’ immediate riots destroy. They rage and burn out. ‘In the best cases...they make do with paving the way for an historical riot; in the worst, they merely indicate that the existing society ... does not possess the means altogether to prevent the advent of an historical sign of rebellion in the desolate spaces for which it is responsible’ (26).

To elaborate his notion of the ‘latent riot,’ Badiou focuses on the countries of ‘the west.’ Here, he is especially interested in new forms of action: for example, a ‘strike’ where a workplace is occupied by community members (retired people, students, the unemployed) rather than employees. The latent riot links ‘several social strata that are generally separated, thus creating on the spot a new subjective type beyond the fragmentation by both the state and its union appendages’ (31). This notion of a new ‘subject’ is essential, according to Badiou, for anything that might count as a rebirth of history. Such new subjectivities are fundamental in that a single event or spectacular incident might lead to an intensification marking an exit from politics as usual. While Badiou’s discussion here is brief, his notion of latent riot may have a significance that differs from the rest of his discussion, lending itself more easily to a kind of intentionality or planning. That is, activists might ask themselves how they might take steps toward the creation of new subjectivities. Perhaps something like the 2012 Chicago Teachers Strike, which required patient and long term union organizing and reinvention, but also included significant parent, student, and community mobilization as well as a withdrawal from the two party system, standing against Chicago Mayor and Obama loyalist Rahm Emanuel, can be thought of in terms of Badiou’s latent riot.

Finally, historical riots are for Badiou, ‘pre-political,’ and the most significant type, representing the possibility of a real opening to the future. An historical riot is defined by three conditions: 1) it occupies an enduring central site, 2) all the components of the people are progressively unified: ‘popular and student youth ... but also factory workers, intellectuals of all sorts, whole families, large numbers of women, employees, civil servants, even some police officers and soldiers, and so forth’ (34), and finally, 3) unification around a single slogan or demand (e.g., ‘Mubarak, clear off’) (35). Badiou views the success of the actions in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011 as carrying the possibility of a new, but as yet unrealized historical sequence. For Badiou, ‘the riot is the guardian of the history of emancipation in intervallic periods’ (41). Intervallic periods are times of sustained revolutionary defeat, times that, from the perspective of those wielding power, are seen as a return to normalcy. In addition to the example of the period from 1980 to the present, Badiou gives the instance of 1815-1850 *after which* the communist Idea assumed vital importance. While riots ‘are the mass sign of a reopening of History,’ they come up against ‘universal problems of politics that remained unsolved in the previous period ... historical riots point to the urgency of a reformulated ideological proposal, a powerful Idea, a pivotal hypothesis’ (42).

So, we move to the limitations and possibilities of the historical riot. The western powers have their own understanding of these riots. ‘According to them, the desire inspiring the riots in the Arab countries is “freedom” in the sense given this term by Westerners—namely, “freedom of opinion” in the fixed framework of unbridled capitalism (“free enterprise”) and a state based on parliamentary representation (“free elections”), which select between practically indistinguishable managers of the established system’ (48). The West, though, is simultaneously anxious and ready to intervene, for it is also necessary for them to conclude ‘let us get our machine guns ready’ (51). Badiou smartly adds that this explains why riots are brutally repressed at home, for the interpretation

noted above is impossible—the rioters in such contexts are instead judged to be criminals and outsiders who do not understand what they have.

The value Badiou assigns to these events, on the other hand, ‘stems from the possibility ... of opening out onto political loyalties not motivated by a desire for the West’ (54). Noting the absence of banners in Tahir Square demanding democracy, he reports that they contained these elements: ‘the country, Egypt; the restoration of the country to its uprisen people...and thus precisely the end of its servility to the West and its Israeli component; and end to corruption and the monstrous inequality between a handful of corrupt elements and the mass of ordinary workers; the desire to build a welfare state that will put an end to the terrible poverty of millions of people’ (55). All of this Badiou notes, can be integrated into a different political Idea, that of communism, specifically through the creation of a new subjectivity (subjects for Badiou are always plural). ‘In a world structured by exploitation and oppression masses of people have, strictly speaking, no existence. They count for nothing.’ Badiou calls these people, who are present in the world but absent from its social meanings and decision processes, ‘The inexistent of the world.’ They are, in fact, almost everyone.

Real change occurs when the inexistent start to exist. The important philosophical category of the event is for Badiou one which ‘makes possible the restitution of the inexistent.’ This subjectivity is so intense that no one can deny the mass demonstrators *are* the Egyptian people, even if numerically they are a tiny fraction. Their numbers are, though, ‘enormous if we stop measuring political impact (as in voting) by inert, separated number’ (58). Not even the movement’s enemies can deny that now we confront *the people*. Badiou likens this to a notion of ‘popular dictatorship’, furthermore comparing it to Rousseau’s general will which Badiou says should not be understood in terms of numerical majority: ‘it is only during historical riots, which are minoritarian but localized, unified and intense, that it makes any sense to refer to an expression of the general will’ (60). Badiou calls this, using his own language, the emergence of a truth. For Badiou, ‘this new political possibility is presented in an explicitly authoritarian form: the authority of truth, the authority of reason.’ It is a truth insofar as it is impossible to dissent from it.

Badiou connects this, additionally, to a somewhat novel understanding of Marx’s dictatorship of the proletariat. While the standard Marxist view is probably that this represents the dictatorship of the numerical majority, rather than the numerical minority (i.e. the bourgeoisie), Badiou embraces a kind of minoritarian authority that has fidelity to the truth of the event.

In order for there to be a new historical opening, there must come organization by those militants who are faithful to and guard the truth as it emerges from the event. They must be *true* to it. For Badiou, during the twentieth century this fidelity was called the communist party, though it ‘must doubtless seek a different name today’ (65). Badiou holds, seemingly on the basis of its historical record that the party form has had its time, incapable of bringing about the withering away of the state. Here we encounter the limitations of the historical riot. Can these fidelities be made and maintained after the initial enthusiasm? Badiou goes so far as to say that this requires the invention of a new temporality, one constructed from the event, which itself is a break in time.

For Badiou, this kind of organizing must involve subjectivities that are fundamentally different than those organized by states, which are in the business of creating those who are outside, who don’t belong, and who are not proper members of society. This is often done through ‘separating names’: Muslim, Roma, Black, Negro, Immigrant, etc. Justice consists in ‘the eradication of separating words,’ in favor of the true universal or the ‘generic’. Organization exists ‘when the power

of the generic is preserved outside the movement, outside the riot' (78). Badiou gives the example of the best uses of the term 'proletariat'. 'It was the name of the power of the generic. Under the name "proletariat" Marx thought possible the emancipation of the whole of humanity' (79). For Badiou, this is not identical to a narrow conception of the working class, and 'great revolutionaries' such as Lenin and Mao knew this. Lenin embraced the peasantry and spoke of the 'whole Russian people.' Mao was clear: the proletariat refers to all who are 'friends of the Revolution' (79).

Ultimately, Badiou looks toward a renewal of both philosophy and politics. Politics concerns itself with truths, not opinions. Rejecting the liberal marketplace, Badiou means to invoke Plato. Truth has authority, though, for Badiou, truths come into being through events that are rare and cannot be predicted. They happen. With a political truth, a new subjectivity emerges. A people who previously did not exist appears on the stage of history. Giving expression to something universal, i.e., the communist Idea (in some respects like the Ideas of Plato), separating names are rejected and some (the vanguard?) create a new form of organization. What will follow from these times of riots and uprisings? Badiou's concluding words are 'we shall see' (99). Given the account that has preceded it, this can only be interpreted optimistically. In the end, though, one might hope for a bit more. Badiou's philosophical orientation lends itself quite well to a hope for a better future. With his emphasis, however, on surprise and spontaneity, it is less clear what steps activists who share Badiou's values, but who do not find themselves in the midst of riots, might take. Badiou's system is, though, one that is fertile and worth working through with an eye toward this end.

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