

‘Badiou in the Antipodes’

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What follows is a slightly edited version of a talk given at Arena Space, Fitzroy, Melbourne on 20th April 2018 on the occasion of the launch of *Badiou and his Interlocutors: Lectures, Interviews and Responses*. Having participated in too many book launches over the years, the difficulty each and every time is to not make each one blur into every other one, to vary the format such that something other than sad platitudes, dutifully applied air-kisses and institutional boxes ticked aren't the stuff of which the night is made. This book only barely under discussion here was edited by Adam Bartlett and Justin Clemens and published by Bloosbury in February of this year. It's not available in *all* good bookstores.

Introduction

Along with translations, essays and a book with Jon Roffe, Justin Clemens and I have also edited several collections of essays. When looking over this one the other day something in one of the interviews struck me as all too apropos regarding yet another. After a long day's journey into night Badiou asks, plaintively, ultimately dejectedly: 'We can stop here? Oh, no? One more...'

Badiou and His Interlocutors: Lectures, Interviews and Responses is something of a four parter + 1: it has lectures by Badiou; interviews with Badiou; edited and expanded presentations given by speakers at the conference we staged for Badiou; and four original essays responding to certain key aspects of what Badiou spoke about on his tour of the antipodes. And it is rounded out by a poetical encomium. I'm happy to say a good few of those contributors are here tonight. It also contains an introduction by Bartlett and Clemens, which deploys but aims beyond that higher irony that Rorty thought was the great charge of the dinner party. Needless to say, Badiou is not a dinner party...!

The collection is, in effect, the discourse of the tour that Badiou undertook of these antipodes in late 2014 and which was primarily funded by the Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy (MSCP).

Following the mass line my talk tonight is 'divided in two'. I'm going to give a sort of narrative account of the early moments of the collection from the perspective of Clemens and myself, two unabashed but certainly not un-ashamed disciples of the old man. Then I want to say something also all too narrative-like and likely tendentious about the revolution in metaphysics, which is the point of Badiou and is the foundation of any and all other claims made for and against his work—politically, artistically and so on.¹ In this part I'll note precisely how those against his work are nothing but sad Aristotelians, clinging to ontological anachronisms and reactionary logics and are fit only for the firing squad which, contra the political pieties of these same Aristotelians, is not the proper telos of any revolution but a decided and necessary measure each and every time.

¹ Anyone who wants some argument for my claims can see my 'Adjust Your Dread: Badiou's Metaphysical Disposition' in A. J. Greenstine & R. J. Johnson (eds), *Contemporary Encounters with Ancient Metaphysics*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

1.

But What Sort of Tale?

What is the form capable of supporting what is at stake in the nomination which is the true name of this book, *Badiou in the Antipodes*: of ten days of airports, plane rides, cabs, hotels and hotel rooms, coffee, meals, people known and unknown and coming out of the woodwork, a suburban BBQ, 'paradise' seen from a hotel window, a Manly ferry and an unrealised swim in the Pacific Ocean—to be in the sea...—shared with a *philosopher*?

Of course, there are also the public lectures, master-classes, interviews and conference spread across three cities in ten stuttering days: Melbourne, Auckland and Sydney. And many conversations, short and long. Sometimes we will ask questions, occasionally interject and affirm or furnish examples but most

often we will just listen. At dinner in Coogee, a casual reflection captures the form of the relation: ‘After CDR was published Sartre was asked to speak at the ENS. Merleu-Ponty and Sartre had had a falling out but nevertheless he came to Sartre’s talk. After, a couple of us took them for coffee... there was some reconciliation...’

Terminal

We arrive late and flustered. We don’t know our way around international arrivals. There are two openings, it seems, through which the scanned, searched and stamped are admitted. One of us, Clemens, shuttles between the two: one of us, Bartlett, stands still, scanning. We are looking for a tall, solidly built man in his late 70s with combed back white hair, walking slowly—‘the privilege of free men’ (as he once told us)—or as the blurb writer Slavoj Zizek puts it, for a ‘figure like Plato walk[ing] among us’. We will have known him when we see him.

Still nervous we have lost our Plato into the democratic hustle of the contemporary Piraeus, we approach the line of chauffers carrying branded tout boards with the names of the paid for class prominently spelled out.

‘Are you waiting for ... 459?’

The 8.45am flight?

Have they come through yet?’

‘This is them,’ the comrade says,

‘they are coming out now.’

The frosted glass doors part and close letting out one rabbit-in-the-headlights looking passenger at a time into the bright Melbourne sun. We watch. They part. There he is, pushing a trolley.

As he rounds the barrier we hail and he replies with a beaming smile and opens his arms toward us. Like a little boy who has missed his daddy, Bartlett walks right in between those arms, mistaking the gesture of delight and arrival for an invitation to a hug. Bartlett takes it anyway. Badiou grips his shoulders and corrects him with the proper French comradely greeting. Clemens, with his own fear and trembling, gets it right, offers the correct French. Words are difficult. After hello, welcome, a few adjectives, the terror, for Bartlett and Clemens, immanent already in the progressive anxiety of the *longue durée* between confirmation of his coming here and the moment of his being there, between disciples and master, between essence and appearance, becomes concrete. Alain Badiou *est arrivé!*

Degrees

The ‘world’s greatest living philosopher’ to cite another blurb (though ‘living’ seems a hedge), is dressed in a flannelette shirt, pale blue workman style pants—pockets half-way down the leg—a green all-weather jacket like the ones you can buy in those stores selling all-weather gear to prospective but timid mountain climbers, and a knitted jumper of questionable colour palate, which asserts itself from underneath the jacket. It’s about 28 degrees. He will barely change out of this outfit, no matter the occasion, and the trousers, never.

As Clemens tries to find the clearest way out and back to the car, Bartlett grabs the trolley, Badiou demurs—for now. This will become a thing—pushing the trolley. When we arrive in New Zealand five days later, Badiou will insist on pushing the trolley carrying our luggage—‘the intellectual’, he insists, ‘must do manual work’.

He will tell us later that in his big blue suitcase his luggage is ‘divided in two’! Winter clothes for the next stage of this *tour de monde*, in god’s own country, the land of the free, and summer clothes for the visit here, to ‘the arsehole end of the earth’. It turns out he is well aware of this Keating-ism just as he is clearly informed of the current gruppen in this country, occupying the positions of the executive of capital and exercising its democratic functions.

In the carpark looking for the misplaced car, we begin what will be a series of conversations about airports in airports: the demi-monde ethos of imperious and commercial banality as the architectural and cultural framework of security state capitalism. Or: the everywhere/nowhere utopia of the global prison-industrial-commercial-echange-complex facilitating the excited transitory from one secure(d) island to another: the becoming present farce of a historical tragedy. Welcome, Bienvenue, Benvidos, Irashaimasu, Sugeng rawuh ... the words change, the thing *stays* the same. This is why philosophers begin with ‘things and not words’. There is no duty, free.

Doublemovement

It’s 9.30am, too early to get into the hotel—they tell us. We go to a café in North Melbourne, a spacious open one and sit at a table by the window. Best not to get too intimate too quick. We have no real idea of the lay of the land. Sure, we have met before but this time he ‘travels alone’, and it’s our gig and all the time. *Che vuoi?* What does a French intellectual want?

Badiou picks up the sugar housed in a small glass jar. Packed in there as it is, it has obviously become moist and the crystals have congealed; instead of taking to it with a teaspoon he upends it over his cup. Sure enough, he gets more than he bargained for. He laughs, we laugh and another running joke—as with Clemens’ always nipping out for a smoke (Badiou repeatedly reminding us he was ‘forty years’ hard-core)—is born. Our first disciples’ instinct is to order him another coffee and simultaneously we look for the wait-staff. But he drinks it without complaint. This double move, us looking to fix everything up right before the master even demands it and Badiou taking on trust whatever comes, forms the dialectic of these ten days. Slowly, if not totally, we will ease out of this anxiety with Badiou *because* of Badiou. He will remain consistently generous and undemanding, an aristocratic-proletarian.

Schedule

He asks for and we show him his schedule. It’s quite brutal, especially for someone just stepped out of a plane from Paris. Later, he will rebuke us for this schedule: Not for the number of events, none of which are repeats; certainly not for the attendances which

are everywhere at capacity, attesting to what Badiou will name a symptom as yet undiagnosable; and not, as he says, for the integrity and intelligence of the audiences, with regard to his work and generally. We are rebuked because we don't put down times on the schedule: no start time or finish time; no actualisation of duration. Time may not be a concept for Badiou but what time it is will have its effect. Regardless, he will keep his father's pocket watch on Paris time trusting that we know what time it is and when he needs to get going. His only admission of time, his only demand, will come, at some dinner or lunch, with a dip of the head, a whisper in the ear: 'it is time to go home now'.

At 2pm we have an interview at ABC Radio National; at 7pm a public lecture at Trades Hall and then dinner. Tomorrow, Saturday, there is a conference between 9.30am and 4pm: Six speakers on Badiou's work—Knox Peden, Jon Roffe, Louise Burchill, Sigi Jottkandt, Alex Ling and Ali Alzadeh. Sunday's a day off—which means the National Gallery of Victoria with Alex, Lauren Bliss, Sam Lindsay and Eloise Mignon and then a BBQ at Clemens' peopled with friends (of the concept)—John Cleary, Bryan Cooke, Lia Hills, Robert Boncardo, Christian Gelder et al.—, various children—Una, Sunday, Jezebel—friends of friends of the concept and the milieu curious. Monday is the master-class in the morning, then lunch and then a roundtable interview with a likely cast of characters: Bartlett, Clemens, Bliss, Hills, Cleary, Ling, Burchill, Cooke, Garret, Mereine, Boncardo. Tuesday, Auckland, for another two events: Public lecture and master-class at Auckland University hosted by Campbell Jones and Jai Bentley-Payne; Sydney on Thursday for three more: Public lecture at the University of New South Wales and master-class with Sigi Jottkandt's brilliant students and skeptical—one is tempted to say, sophisticated—colleagues, and a public lecture for the Sydney Seminar Series at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, hosted by Alex Ling of Western Sydney University, shoring up his performance review and annoying his nominal superior. On Sunday, Badiou leaves for Los Angeles, Madison and New York.

We check Badiou into the hotel—'*c'est parfait*'—and leave him to a short rest before the 2pm interview with Joe Gelonisi on Radio National's the 'Philosophers Zone' in which Badiou will, with a strangely unerring elegance, set Joe and the nation straight on love and politics, while Bartlett and Clemens sit less than two feet away, across the table, in the tiny studio, numbed by, frankly, the profound and proximate beauty of it all.

While Badiou rests on this afternoon of the first day, Clemens and Bartlett wander the streets of Carlton, delightfully dazed and confused; we drift into *Readings* and make fun and drift out again. In this moment we felt it in ourselves. Let's put it like this: If it is right and reasonable to rebel against the reactionaries, it is right and reasonable to serve the revolution (in metaphysics).

In this way, in Badiou's words, there now will have been, '*an ecole antipodean*'.

2.

The Metaphysical Revolution Will Not Be Televised

God is in the metaphysics. Nietzsche was right about that.

But this is because everyone was already under the mathematical condition. From the earliest days, thinking about what there is, why there is something rather than nothing, led on almost exponentially, via the continued problem of the relation or non-relation of the many and the one, to the point where you couldn't go on any longer because there was only the constancy of going on.

This 'we can't go any further as there is only going on' had to be made concrete, ontological; the knowledge of it had to be conceptualised, had to be made true. The one more and the one-all were minted on a single coin. Thus we have the two-tone metaphysics of pre *and* post-Kant and we have there too, downstream, the two tone species of philosopher—the anti-philosopher and the sophist: for one, as you know, there is no truth because there is only going on and for the other truth is precisely located only in the going on where *we* can't go.

This already troubled Plato, hence his mucking about with different manys and different ways to think the many as one and not, and his ultimate dissatisfaction with the One he finally posited as placeholder, acknowledging that there was more to think but that he couldn't do it. This placeholder—the point of recommencement for all tomorrow's philosophies—became, after that brilliant phony Aristotle, THE place as such, which is to say, the end (of the beginning).

One of the things Badiou points out is that Plato and thus philosophy was thereby but necessarily, stalled, stalled in potential and worse, though necessarily, the *knowledge* of potential became, if you like, the order of things. This is the history of metaphysics from Aristotle to Kant and from Kant's chickening-out, on, passing by of course those extramural efforts to break the seam as it were—Leibniz (with some reserve) and Spinoza for example, and also Descartes and Hegel but without still the means to achieve what each knew was vital.

It took another diagonal argument outside philosophy but within metaphysics, another turning from sense to indiscernibility, to the rationality and demonstrability of the indiscernible, to move knowledge on or out, to once again make for the possibility of a knowledge *in* truth and a being *there*. It was the arch-sophist and man of the world, Callicles, who noted Plato's original geometrical turning of the world upside down—the world of knowledge, the knowledge of the world. Plato's mucking about with slaves, women and diagonals was not at all knowledge for the sophisticates of his day, but corrupt, revolutionary and hence criminal.

Today, what we might label as shorthand and using the French example, the BHL (Bernard Henri Levy) crowd, with their expansive Theirs-isms, their exultant Furer-isms, their manic Solzenistinism and their reductive, transmutive Arendtian-isms, in short

their assertive and as such uncourageous liberalisms, are just the sort, suitably generalised, suitably globalised, who gleefully administer in the media and in the schools, the show trials of what Badiou names the truths (or *truthes*, as he pronounces it) of which our times are capable. These variants are the Lycon, Meletus and Anytus of the day, the sycophants who brought the case against Socrates, the representatives in words of the business of the ruling class and their pedagogy, their knowledge and finally their metaphysics and/or professed lack of. Their vision is today the ubiquitous one, the one that curries and is granted cultural, institutional favour precisely because the harm it does is always already in accord with the harm being done as business as usual.

All I want to note here is that Badiou has done what very few—for or against him—take seriously. Mostly because they assume that in such a thing their interests—that sacred cow of ‘identity’—are not at stake. I was once told this directly by, to use Lacan’s magnificent formulation, ‘a young prince of the university’. ‘I don’t care about the infinite’, he regaled us, ‘it’s not something I’m interested in’. Exemplary.

I am being reductive here. As Clemens always reminds me, it’s more nuanced than this but I’m a reductive man. Clearly this is no excuse, and I should be seeking to recover from what has been bequeathed me as subject; neither identity nor interest is philosophical. But anyway the point is Badiou has, as a philosopher, treated with the fact that mathematics, that most rational of our discourses, that does not move other than at the point of irrefutability, discovered and formalised as such that there are infinite infinities, which means that it is possible to actualise any infinite as one infinite in its own right.

The mathematics is there to actualise the infinite—exactly what the great phony put a lid on all those years ago. Aristotle’s revenge on Plato—making a knowledge out of what *had not yet* been demonstrated to be true (and thus really making a mockery of his own logic concerning false premises) has lasted a long time as metaphysics—Kant changed nothing, he vowed, of what the Stagarian promised—and of course to paraphrase Nietzsche, that anti-philosopher *par excellence*, its shadow will have lasted a long time still. The sophist is the intimate imitator of the philosopher and the anti-philosopher the philosopher’s alter-ego.

That the infinite is actual means then that there is at least one more actual infinite for every infinite going, thus two things: There is no One, so no God, no One-All. Any One is already multiple, any one is also already a part. The One-All-God, as such, is mathematically impossible and as the supreme mathematician he or she would have to bow to that—not simply his/her own inexistence but his or her own not being One.

It also means that what is set adrift in potential (that favourite ascription of all teachers to those students who resist, by nature, what is on offer [for good or ill]) that unknown, unknowable power, which is to say, that strange knowledge of what is unknowable, that can supposedly be endlessly drawn upon without

knowledge as the basis of all that is manifestly known is undone, revealed, turned over as, simply and banally, actual. The claim to know that which is unknowable is the foundation of every belief—from God to the market. But if the unknowable *as such* does not exist by the force of the actual, then we actually *can* come to know all that we do not know. Under this fundamentally new and yet of course ontologically absolute orientation, we actually can be *subject* and not subject.

It turns out, of course, that the denial of being and the knowing of being as unknowable which could be translated politically as the fetish of identity, on the one hand, and the fetish of the market, on the other—are really two sides of the same coin and not at all opposed. Their putative opposition is the neo-liberal pincer movement of the day. We have to remember that *today's* so-called 'left'—that called left by the right and by the Greens, say—is a construction of neoliberalism itself and is thus included in it. We should always remember Stalin: 'both choices are worse'. Such a dialectician.

This means that every philosophy, theory, mode of critique, discourse, etc., that predicates itself—mostly unknowingly—on the good old potential infinite is flogging a dead horse up shit creek, metaphysically and subjectively speaking. And again, your interests, like your opinions and beliefs, don't interest metaphysics. The short story is, if you really (re) commence to think you will hit up against this question of the being true—that the infinite is not One nor many but void and thus Real. Thus is it written. The message on the tablet is no longer valium.

This is what it means to think again, a thorough going reorientation to the situation at hand, which is philosophy, which is rare and irreducible, not impossible but hardly visible, and without which, ultimately, we will only chase our unknowable self-interest like the running dog chases its master's tail.

This is what the name Badiou names: The world turned upside down; from the *horror vacui* of potential to the joyful actualisation of the void. As he himself says in an interview in the book—he can't tell anymore where Plato ends and where he begins.

This, then, is also the kernel of the book: *Badiou in the Antipodes*. This is what we wanted to call it and in the introduction we have set this out. Bloomsbury were against it because they are precisely of the times and the times are right side up, which is to say, standing on their head. But as the world today remains stultified in re-presentation, the mirroring effect it is has us suppose we are standing on our own two feet.

This is the feasible and pragmatic lie of known-knowledge whose image is best captured by the police chief in Jean Genet's play *The Balcony*, who, desperate to find a costume to wear in the brothel of images, and befitting his position, fixes on that of a giant prick—'I am', he says, 'a prick of great status'. Here, at the arsehole end of the world, only the true will have been the impotence of the phallus.

Let me be clear. Bloomsbury failed. Their reasons for forcing us to give this book its final title were things like: 'it's too parochial'—as if it were an Aus-

tralian story or some such, and ‘people would be confused’ by this and so not buy it. Really?

As if the name Badiou could be so reduced, as if the name Badiou is adjunct, an identity of some sort, a matter of potential interests; as if the name Badiou is not always already universal, absolute, no matter where the flesh resides at any given time. As Badiou notes, with all the irony a truth contains for its situation: *la philosophie, c’est moi!*

Colophon
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