

Alain Badiou: A Pseudo-Maoist Obscurantist

[This is the draft of a section from my book in progress entitled *The Marxist-Leninist-Maoist Class Interest Theory of Ethics*. This section (12.10) comes from the chapter on “Pseudo-Marxist Ethical Theories”. Comments and criticisms are welcome! —S.H. (3/1/08)]

Back in section 2.1 of this book I quoted Marx and Engels on the philosophy of their era. They remarked that “German philosophy is a consequence of German petty-bourgeois conditions” and that “the philosophers have only to dissolve their language into the ordinary language, from which it is abstracted, in order to recognize it as the distorted language of the actual world”. Contemporary philosophy largely fits this description as well, especially European “Continental Philosophy”, and *most especially* recent and contemporary French philosophy.

Recent French philosophy is extremely difficult to understand for those who have not been carefully schooled (indoctrinated?) in it, because it consists almost entirely of comments couched in a special “philosophical language”. That language is not French, and it is not English or any other natural language. It is a “language” which systematically uses many French words in quite bizarre ways. These words do not mean what they normally do in ordinary French, and when they are translated into English they do not mean what they normally do in ordinary English.¹ In this milieu words like ‘truth’ and even words that are generally considered less philosophically problematic, such as ‘event’, ‘subject’, ‘situation’, ‘fidelity’, ‘void’, ‘state’, ‘address’, ‘project’, ‘singularity’, and—it seems—endless others, all have strange and obscure meanings—even after they are supposedly “defined”! On top of this, weird special coinages are frequently introduced such as ‘the Other’, ‘alterity’, ‘evental’, etc. Actually, it is even worse than that: *Each* French philosopher has his or her *own* philosophical language, though generally it is related in some family-resemblance sort of way to the other recent French philosophical languages, with some considerable similarities in the use of many particular philosophical terms. And all these “philosophical languages” are both extremely abstract and bizarre in the extreme. The more divorced they are from ordinary language and ordinary existence, the more their authors seem to like them. They are all deeply obscurantist in their effect, whether or not that is the intention of their proponents (as I strongly suspect that it is!).

Engels remarks in his *Dialectics of Nature* that

Philosophical expositions which cannot be grasped by every educated person do not, in our opinion, deserve the printer’s ink expended on them. What has been clearly thought out can also be said clearly and without circumlocution. The philosophical evils which disfigure the writings of the erudite seem to aim more at concealing thoughts than at revealing them.²

Personally, like Engels, I despise this whole approach to philosophy, of the sort that contemporary French philosophy typifies, and I really have no wish to even bother with it at all. However, there is one character, Alain Badiou, who I have to bother with briefly because he has in the past called himself a “Maoist” and is now often called a “Post-Maoist” or at least is still supposed to have some sort of “association” with Maoism³, and because he has written a book on “ethics” which has been translated into English as *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.⁴ Given my general lack of familiarity with recent French philosophy and my strong hostility to it, and given its obscurantist nature, it is very unlikely that I have fully understood all of what

Badiou is trying to say in this book. Nevertheless, I gave it a serious attempt, and this is my report on it.

The first thing to note here is the complete absence of any class content in Badiou's conception and analysis of morality or ethics (he draws no distinction between the two⁵). Thus, in the whole first part of the book where he criticizes what I would call the "bourgeois conception of human rights", he never once calls it *bourgeois* or identifies it as an aspect of *bourgeois* morality or ideology. Instead of attacking bourgeois morality, and promoting an alternative proletarian morality, he seems to be attacking merely one abstract conception of ethics (relating to just the narrow sphere of the prevailing establishment notion of human rights) while saying that he is opposed to all ethics *in general*.

Badiou states on p. 9 that one presupposition of the "ethic of human rights" that he is criticizing is that it posits "a general human subject, such that whatever evil befalls him is universally identifiable..." At that early point in the book, I thought, "Well, good; he may be criticizing the bourgeoisie here for its classless view of the 'human subject'." But that isn't what he meant here. Nowhere does he try to bring out the obvious fact that different *classes* have different conceptions of what is right or wrong!

In fact, in an interview which is included as an appendix to the book, Badiou describes how he and his supposedly "Maoist" or "Post-Maoist" circle of friends have actually turned away from having a class perspective generally:

The second thing that has changed over these last twenty years concerns the status of class. For a long time we were faithful to the idea of a class politics, a class state, and so on. Today we think that political initiatives which present themselves as representations of a class have given everything they had to give. The Marxist analysis of classes remains a fully reliable tool. I think that global trends have essentially confirmed some of Marx's fundamental intuitions. There is no going back on this; there is no need for a revision of Marxism itself. It is a matter of going beyond the idea that politics *represents* objective groups that can be designated as classes. This idea has had its power and importance. But in our opinion, we cannot today begin from or set out from this idea. We can begin from political processes, from political oppositions, from conflicts and contradictions, obviously. But it is no longer possible to code these phenomena in terms of representations of classes. In other words, emancipatory politics or reactionary politics may exist, but they cannot be rendered immediately transitive to a scientific, objective study of how class functions in society.⁶

This opposition to viewing things from a class perspective is apparent in Badiou's other works as well, and in his philosophy even more than in his politics. In Badiou's essay "One Divides into Two"⁷, he launches into his subject (whatever that *is*, exactly!) with the remark that "Today, Lenin's political works are being entirely revisited through the canonical opposition between democracy and totalitarian dictatorship." My friend, Jerry Leonard, in the course of criticizing that essay and the rest of Badiou's book *Century*,⁸ comments:

Badiou can't say who or what is "revisiting" Lenin because this is the trademark, this is the hallmark of the bourgeoisie as a class which must represent itself anonymously, as if, in this case, it means the same thing for Lenin to be "entirely revisited" by reactionaries as by revolutionaries. He can't address this question in a Marxist way, that is, because to present this question in a Marxist way would mean that he would have to say, he would have to seriously analyze, how such a "revisitation" involves a renewed "looking at things" from the *viewpoint* and from the *position* of a definite *class* of "today".

There is no such thing—except in the liberal political imagination—in class society, “today” or at any other time in history, as a “revisitation” of anything from a point of view, from a frame of conceptual reference, which transcends or stands above or outside of class struggle and class antagonism, whether such struggle is recognized self-consciously or not. But Badiou gives away his common liberalism because he thinks that such a “transcendent” position exists, because he keeps silent about it and in effect speaks with the acceptable level of static and distortion for the bourgeoisie in “today’s” international climate of crisis, where the main question that *is* indeed being “revisited” by them is *how to avoid open class struggle at the level of ideas as well as, most of all, at the level of armed combat.*⁹

That’s a very perceptive criticism of not only Badiou, but of liberal bourgeois ideologists in general! One of the best ways to spot a bourgeois “radical-liberal” who has insinuated himself into the nominally MLM movement is by his avoidance and even outright rejection of expressing his views from a class perspective. And in Badiou’s case that is true not only for his remarks about Lenin’s struggle against Kautsky, but also for his whole conception of ethics. In Badiou’s *Ethics*, “class” is a concept which is notable only because it is *completely absent* from the picture!

Badiou talks about “interests” to a surprising degree in his short book on ethics. But for him interests (let alone *class* interests) are *not* the foundation for ethics. On the contrary, he consistently *contrasts* people’s concern about their interests with “any Good” or with ethics as he views it:

In any case, everyone knows this: the routines of survival are indifferent to any Good you might care to mention. Every pursuit of an interest has success as its only source of legitimacy.¹⁰

These two brief sentences are very telling. Badiou thinks that the pursuit of interests (even class interests) is *unrelated* to ethics, *and therefore* he is totally against *all* ethics as it is normally understood (and not just a specifically bourgeois ethics)! In his political work he and his small group of associates apparently do concern themselves with the interests of the *sans-papiers* (undocumented illegal immigrant workers) in amnesty reforms and so forth, and so I suppose we should commend him for concerning himself with *interests* in politics even if he thinks this has nothing at all to do with morality or what is right or wrong.

“Everyone knows this”, he says, that the pursuit of interests has nothing to do with ethics. Ha! This is only something that those poisoned, to one degree or another, by Kantian ethics *think* they know! Badiou is not a complete Kantian, and specifically does not seem to agree with Kant’s focus on duty, obligation, legality, and so forth as his translator, Peter Hallward, notes.¹¹ Hallward adds that what sets Badiou apart from Kant is primarily Badiou’s “unwavering insistence on the particular and exceptional character of every ethical obligation”.¹²

But Hallward also emphasizes Badiou’s basic agreement with Kant on more fundamental points:

Like Badiou, Kant abstracts questions of ethics from all ‘sensibility’, and also like Badiou, he posits the universal as the sole legitimate basis for subjective action, through the familiar command to ‘act on a maxim that at the same time contains in itself its own universal validity for every rational being’. It was Kant who first evacuated the ethical command of any substantial content, so as to ground ethical ‘fidelity’ in nothing other than the subject’s own *prescription*.... Kant’s very procedure—the evacuation of all heteronomous interests and motives, the suspension of all references to ‘psychology’ and ‘utility’, all allusion to any ‘special property of human nature’, all calculation required to obtain ‘happiness’ or ‘welfare’—bears some resemblance to Badiou’s.¹³

Kant “bears some resemblance to Badiou” his translator says, as if Badiou came first and Kant borrowed *from him!* Hallward seems to be basking in the reflected light of Badiou’s colossal ego!

Even if he departs from Kant in some respects, Badiou is much more of a Kantian than he is a Marxist or a Maoist. For us actual Marxist-Leninist-Maoists, what *we understand* as genuinely good and right is that which is in the common, collective interests *of the working class*—that is where our legitimacy comes from. And that means that the “routines of survival” and improvement of the condition of the workers are definitely not “indifferent” to what *we* call good! Badiou says that “For the human animal as such, absorbed in the pursuit of his interests, there is no truth...”¹⁴, while for him the only valid “ethic” is the “ethic of truths” (whatever *that* means, exactly). But it is definitely true that the capitalists exploit the workers, and it is definitely true that proletarian revolution is in the interests of the working class. If these are not “truths”, because they are based on mere “interests”, then the hell with Badiou’s conception of “truth”!

I will not attempt to thoroughly explicate Badiou’s small concession to ethics, his theory of the “ethic of truths”, because—as near as I can tell the theory is quite incoherent, and in any case has nothing to do with Marxism. Very roughly and briefly, the idea seems to go like this: There are important “events” in the world such as the French Revolution, the Cultural Revolution in China, Galileo’s creation of physics, Schoenberg’s invention of the unstructured twelve-tone musical scale, and so forth. These “events” have associated with them “circumstances of a truth”, and the only real “ethic” involves a “fidelity” to the “truth” of these “events”. However, he also puts it the other way around: he defines “a truth” as “the real process of a fidelity to an event”. (He makes it all much more complex and vastly more obscure, however, talking about “fidelities to fidelities” and so forth, but I’ll ignore all that.)

One immediate, and obviously difficulty is that it seems that there have been plenty of “events” in history which have been anything but good and moral. Badiou is conscious of this basic difficulty with his theory, and therefore selects one of these clear counterexamples and spends a lot of space trying to explain it away. This is the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in the 1930s. He decides, for some obscure reason, that this was not an “event” in his sense (he calls it a “simulacrum” instead),¹⁵ and that “Nazi politics was not a truth process”.¹⁶ But what justification does he have for ruling out this rather obvious counterexample to his theory? The theoretical mumbo-jumbo aside, it seems to come down to a Kantian sort of objection: the Nazis were nationalists and racists, and therefore did not represent *everyone everywhere*.¹⁷

But if this Kantian objection (implicitly applying a categorical imperative) is accepted as the test, then it seems that Badiou’s inclusion of the French Revolution and the Cultural Revolution in China have to also be ruled out as “genuine events” and actual “truth processes”. After all, these episodes *also* did not represent *everyone everywhere* (in that they were definitely directed against one section of society—either the King and the feudal nobility, or the neo-bourgeois capitalist-roaders within the Communist Party of China). The only real way to even *begin* to make this “ethic of truth” theory vaguely coherent is to give it a class basis. And if you do that the entire theory becomes completely unnecessary, since then we might as well go with the much simpler and clearer MLM Class Interest Theory of Ethics instead!

In summary, what Badiou has tried to do is cook up a version of classless semi-Kantian ethics which will always endorse the conclusions he had already come to approve of as a radical-liberal and some-time enthusiast for the Cultural Revolution and the 1968 events in France—events which were serious episodes of class struggle. There is no actual way that a coherent and consistent theory of that type can possibly be constructed; it is an attempt to make a classless ethical theory that nevertheless sides with one class! So the only thing to do was to make it so

obscure and unintelligible that he could even hide the fundamental logical flaws from himself. In other words his ethical theory is an exercise in self-deluding bullshit, pure and simple.

It is curious that Badiou still likes to associate himself with “Maoism”. Jerry Leonard suggests that this relationship, no matter how tenuous it was or has become, is still useful to Badiou because “it makes him look ‘new’ and all full of fire and brimstone”.¹⁸ No doubt that also attracts the attention of middle class college students who like the thrill of dabbling with dangerous ideas—especially if they are “the latest thing” *and* there is little actual danger involved for them.¹⁹

The very first quotation in Mao’s Little Red Book begins: “The force at the core leading our cause forward is the Chinese Communist Party.”²⁰ But this is what Badiou now says about a revolutionary party:

Up to the end of the 1970s, my friends and I defended the idea that an emancipatory politics presumed some kind of political party. Today we are developing a completely different idea, which we call ‘politics without party’.²¹

So Badiou rejects the class perspective, having a revolutionary party, and pretty much all of MLM ethics and philosophy at the very least. Quite obviously, whatever this guy is, it has nothing to do with Maoism. If it is “Post-Maoism”, then that “Post” part actually means virtually a *complete* rejection of Mao, and certainly of Mao’s most essential views about revolutionary class struggle.

Notes

¹ Translators even admit this, to a degree! In his “Notes on the Translation” to the book being examined in this section (see a later footnote), the translator (Peter Hallward) remarks that “Every other important element of Badiou’s terminology—*truth, truth-process [processus de vérité], event, subject, being, situation, fidelity, void [vide]*—has been translated as literally as possible, even when (as occasionally with ‘void’ and ‘fidelity’) these terms jar with normal English usage.” However, as far as I can tell all these terms *always* “jar with normal English usage”!

² Frederick Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*; quoted in *Monthly Review*, July-August 1980, p. 42. I have not yet been able to locate this passage in the *Marx-Engels Collected Works*. Other people have said much the same thing as Engels. Wittgenstein, for example, said “Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly.” However, in what must surely be one of the greatest ironies in the Wittgenstein corpus, he says this in that most notoriously obscure early volume, the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*!

³ Starting in the late 1960s Badiou was a self-proclaimed “Maoist”. He was the founder and leader, in 1970, of the third largest Maoist organization (it didn’t call itself a party) in France, the *Groupe pour la Fondation de l’Union des Communistes de France Marxistes Léninistes*, more commonly called the UCFML (Union of Communists of France Marxist-Leninist). [A. Belden Fields, *Trotskyism and Maoism: Theory and Practice in France and the United States*, (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1988), p. 98.] The UCFML was abolished in 1984 and a smaller and looser group called *Organisation Politique* replaced it. [Fields, p. 268.] Badiou remains either the leader, or one of the top leaders of this new group. While it is certainly questionable as to how much of a genuine Maoist Badiou ever was, since the end of the UCFML he has moved further away from Maoist stances in both politics and philosophy. Does he nevertheless still consider himself to be a Maoist? I have been unable to find a definitive statement from him about this. Of course finding a definitive statement by Badiou about *anything* is pretty difficult!

Bruno Bosteels wrote a 60 page article, entitled “Post-Maoism: Badiou and Politics”, which tries to disentangle Badiou’s relationships with Maoism over the years. [*Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique*, vol. 13, #3, Winter 2005, pp. 575-634. Online at: <http://positions.dukejournals.org/cgi/reprint/13/3/575?rss=1>] He argues that “Badiou’s relation to Maoism ... amounts to a form of post-Maoism”. [p. 576]

The back cover of the paperback edition of Badiou’s *Ethics* book says that “For many years a Maoist, he remains a committed political activist.” That’s ambiguous, but suggests that he may no longer call himself a Maoist.

⁴ Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, translated and introduced by Peter Hallward, (Verso, 2001). The original French edition is entitled *L’éthique Essai sur la conscience du Mal*, (Editions Hatier, 1998).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2. Badiou says that while Hegel drew a “subtle distinction” between ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’, he himself seems to imply that he will be following contemporary (French) usage deriving from Kant where apparently no such distinction exists.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁷ “One Divides into Two” was originally delivered in a series of lectures at the Collège International de Philosophie. A version, dated April 7, 1999, and translated by Alberto Toscano, is posted at <http://culturemachine.tees.ac.uk/Cmach/Backissues/j004/Articles/Badiou.htm> It is stated there that the essay was scheduled to be included in Badiou’s book *Century*.

⁸ Alain Badiou, *Century*, (English ed., Polity Press, 2007).

⁹ Jerry Leonard, “Epochalypse Now: A Primer on Badiou’s *Century*”, an unpublished critique.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou, *Ethics...*, op. cit., p. 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, translator’s introduction, p. xxi.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. xix-xx.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁷ Of course Badiou doesn’t say this clearly; he seems to never say *anything* clearly! Here is one passage where he tries to explain why the Nazi example is not a counterexample to his “ethic of truth” theory:

“Fidelity to a simulacrum, unlike fidelity to an event, regulates its break with the situation not by the universality of the void, but by the closed particularity of an abstract set (the ‘Germans’ or the ‘Aryans’). Its invariable operation is the unending construction of this set, and it has no other means of doing this than that of ‘voiding’ what surrounds it. The void, ‘avoided’ by the simulacrous promotion of an ‘event-substance’, here returns, with its universality, as what must be accomplished in order that this substance can be. This is to say that what is addressed ‘to everyone’ (and ‘everyone’, here is necessarily that which does not belong to the German communitarian substance—for this substance is not an ‘everyone’ but, rather, some ‘few’ who dominate ‘everyone’) is death, or that deferred from of death which is slavery in the service of the German substance.” [*Ibid.*, p. 74.]

¹⁸ Jerry Leonard, personal communication, Aug. 7, 2007.

¹⁹ This reminds me of children’s delight and fascination with dinosaurs. They are tremendously awesome and frightening, but the kids know they are also now all dead. The perfect combination for a safe thrill! There is of course a very progressive aspect to the desire of the young to dabble in dangerous ideas; it allows us more of a chance than we would otherwise have for a genuine hearing with them for our revolutionary ideas and MLM interpretation of the world around us. But these middle class students also tend to draw back into the safety of abstract academic ideas and a withdrawal from any long-term commitment to work for social revolution. We need a number of people from this strata who are exceptions to this tendency to draw back in order to rebuild a revolutionary movement in the U.S., but we also need to recognize that these more dedicated youth *are exceptions* in their milieu, and that the main efforts at building a revolutionary movement then need to shift more toward the truly downtrodden in society.

²⁰ Mao Zedong, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1966), p. 1.

²¹ Badiou, *Ethics...*, p. 95. (In the interview appendix.)