

“Rescuing Philosophy from Academic Irrelevance”: Images of the Present Time (2023) by Alain Badiou

A Book Review

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Theme: [History](#)

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*Alain Badiou is undoubtedly among the greatest of living philosophers; one that may fairly be credited with **rescuing philosophy from academic irrelevance**, and the twin enemies of scientism and historicism. For Badiou, philosophy does not merely interpret the world (as Marx famously asserted in his “Theses on Feuerbach”). For an interpretation of the world, we would do better to look to myths, religions, and the various wisdom schools. Philosophy, presupposing mathematics, is a fundamentally rational and conceptual rather than hermeneutic undertaking, aimed at answering the question: does there exist anything with a universal value, and if so, how is this possible? Badiou secured his place in the philosophical pantheon with three massive tomes, which together provide a rigorous account of Truths, or the production in time and space of things to which we may ascribe universal value: *Being and Event* (1988), *Logics of Worlds* (2006), and *The Immanence of Truths* (2018).*

Images of the Present Time (Columbia University Press, 2023) contains a series of three seminars delivered between 2001 and 2004. The first section presents a sustained philosophical analysis of contemporary nihilism and is initially taken up with the question of identifying the ‘emblem,’ that is, the master signifier of the present time – and Badiou’s claim is that democracy is that emblem, a political system that “does not prohibit or restrain, or not excessively.” This raises the question of how democracy is correlated with freedom: given that fewer and fewer things are prohibited, what does that say for freedom

under this regime? Ultimately, not so much: as Descartes already knew, indiscriminate freedom, or the freedom to do whatever you want, is at best 'the lowest degree of freedom.' "Thinking you're a free Subject just because whatever you want to do or say is not prohibited is sheer nonsense." It is true, for example, that almost nothing is prohibited in public speech, yet that does not mean that something significant has been "publicly pronounced... if nothing is prohibited and yet nothing, properly speaking, has been said, freedom does not exist."

Badiou's central thesis is that, at the present time, there is no world – in fact, there is no present, strictly speaking. Why isn't the democratic world a world?

In brief, because it is a world "in which everything is assumed to be equivalent to everything else." Endorsing Plato's notion that such a condition "precludes the configuration of a world," Badiou argues that the critique of a world where everything is assumed to be equivalent to everything else, can be easily transposed to modern democracy in terms of the monetary principle of exchange, the rule of exchange-value over use-value in capital. Modern democracy creates a "potential zone of equivalence of everything with everything else through its monetary presentation."

Perhaps not since Socrates has a philosopher been so genuinely concerned with youth, with the young, as Badiou. This is perhaps not so surprising when we consider that Badiou puts himself squarely in the Socratic tradition by affirming that the task of the philosopher is precisely to "corrupt the youth" (one of the main charges brought against Socrates) – which means to show them that another life is possible, what he calls 'the true life,' which, as "something worth living for, far outstrips money, pleasure and power." What youth under capitalism forgets is that "the substitutability of pleasures is only one particular form of freedom and by no means the definition of freedom as such." True freedom means to live by an Idea, one that invariably includes the idea of a future, and that in turn will involve subjection or discipline, without which there can be no meaningful or genuinely creative project.

Under capitalism we must constantly be available to the encounter with commodities. Badiou refers to this as validation, "to be the eternal equivalent of a consumer, the customer body..." This is distinguished from but closely related to valuation, which is formally biologizing and translates into the requirement that we keep fit and have the requisite body. "Through validation and valuation, the democratic individual becomes identical to their body," which is now a commodified body. Hence, Badiou's insistence on the 'democratization of prostitution.' The prostitutorial, that is, "the reduction of every norm to the commercial potentialities of bodies," has become paradigmatic. It is worth noting that this is perfectly compatible with the suppression of prostitution as such. What Badiou is underscoring with the notion of the prostitutorial is "the equating of everything with a space reduced to the exchange of bodies and money."

It requires violence and ferocious power to reduce the person to a commodified body – but this is not a violence against bodies so much as "violence against the body's capacity for ideas." The imperative today is "Live without any ideas." This injunction is propped up with familiar arguments, which generally turn on the good of animalistic contentment: the horrors of the twentieth century showed us what living with Ideas leads to, namely, violence against bodies, so, "Live by life; don't live by Ideas! Live to live, or, in other words, to survive." It is a mindset that "plunges us into a sort of commercial animality" – which is to

say that capitalism is the animalization of the human beast, who no longer lives except in terms of its interests, and what it deems to be its due. The body without Ideas is a body that is prepared to submit “obediently to the encounter with commodities.”

The reigning ideology is, live without any purpose, without any universality because the alternative is totalitarianism. In other words, totalitarianism has become a kind of bogeyman used to legitimate the contemporary hegemonic system in which a “terrible unity” prevails, “supported by effective built-in material mechanisms.” We have not managed to banish disorder, but ours is a system which has indeed achieved the “absolute capacity to keep otherness out.” Nowhere is this more evident than in the incontestability of democracy, that is, in the untouchability of the democratic emblem. Fidelity to the democratic emblem comes at the cost of a constraint that involves the subject’s having to confront “the commercialized world as a consuming subjectivity.”

In the second series of lectures, entitled “The Logic of Exceptions,” Badiou examines what constitutes an exception to the emblem or the naked power that the emblem sustains. What would count as an exception to the imperative of commodity circulation? Badiou identifies four types of noncirculation, that is, four types of declaration that are heterogenous to commodity circulation. These are demonstration, the paradigm of which is a mathematical theorem; contemplation, which arises in relation to the work of art; action, or emancipatory politics; and passion, that is, love, the one that becomes two.

For Badiou, one of the great tasks of philosophy is to safeguard the various forms of truth (mathematical-scientific, artistic, political and amorous) from subservience of any kind, but especially to the imperative of circulation (commodification). Philosophy safeguards science by defending the radical independence of science from technology and the dominance of capital. Hence, Badiou’s privileging of mathematics, which by its very nature “works against the idea of usefulness.” For its part, art is fundamentally an instrument of combat against the imperative of democratic materialism that we live without any ideas. Affirmative art gives us a fictionalization, a semblance, or illusion of life under the Idea; and even the most pessimistic and painful art, still operates a fictional world that gives us an image what a world without pain or alienation might be like. Art is the “radiance of joy,” whatever its subject; and philosophy is the guardian of this vocation of art, against an overly critical view of art’s function. In fact, as Badiou observes, criticism has worn itself out: it is not criticism we need now as much as ‘heterogenous affirmation,’ an affirmation heterogenous to the market.

In the final series (interrupted after four sessions), Badiou takes up the age-old, or rather ‘time-worn’ philosophical question of “what it means to live.” Much of the material here is developed in *Logics of Worlds*, beginning with his critical appraisal of the ordinary metaphysics of our era, meaning the metaphysics that everyone shares, almost spontaneously as it were. It is the metaphysics that all of us will at times catch ourselves holding if we bother to examine what we think about what there is. Badiou refers to this ordinary metaphysics as democratic materialism, and its essential thesis is that there are only bodies and languages. So, it really is a metaphysics because it is a claim about what is real: namely, bodies seized to varying degrees by languages – which, of course, is not to be understood as limited to natural languages but includes all ‘language-games.’ to use Wittgenstein’s term, and all possible semiotics.

Democratic materialism is defined by three characteristics: First, it is a metaphysics without categories (unlike metaphysical systems from Aristotle to Hegel). To say there are only

bodies and languages is to say that “there are no categories of logical universalism transversal to bodies or to languages.” There are no transversal categories by which the dissemination of languages across cultures can be understood – simply put, there are no universals that can be applied across cultures. The idea is that it is democratic not to have categories, because in the end they are totalitarian: a category “purports to subsume all the different bodies and languages.”

Second, democratic materialism is a metaphysics cleansed of truth. It is not simply that Truth is the name of a category and so must needs be banished or allowed to ‘fade away.’ That there is no truth, strictly speaking, means that “there is basically a relativism. You can move around the many different bodies and languages, but you can’t extract anything like a truth from them.” In the place of truth, we get relevancies, where a relevancy is a “certain type of temporary seizing of bodies by languages.” Yet a truth is nothing like a relevancy: truths cannot be dependent on the variations of language, the vicissitudes of perception or historical traits. What is true here is true everywhere, and what is postulated for one and all is cannot be grasped by the logic of cultural differences or relevancies.

The third negative feature of the reigning metaphysics is that there is no eternity, there is only time. The denial of eternity is ultimately a denial of the separability of the forms, as Plato understood: “If you want eternity, there has to be a minimum separability of the forms.” For democratic materialism there is only the relevancy of the forms; there are no ‘eternal truths.’ What does Badiou mean by an eternal truth? In fact, there is no shortage of examples. That there is an infinite number of prime numbers is an eternal truth: it did not descend from a heaven, Platonic or otherwise. All truths are immanent, they appear in time. In this case, it appeared when Greek mathematicians proved it. When that occurred, “something like a separability of the forms was created” – eternity means, in other words, that the truth is irreducible to language, or the specific historical context in which it emerged, separable from the relevancy in which it was constituted. For Badiou, it is correct to say that we are ‘Immortals’ – but this is not to propose an afterlife of the soul, or anything of that nature. It means that there are truths, or creations of universal value and insofar as we can participate in universality we are tapping into eternity.

Since Plato, the mark of a great philosopher has been that they aim to rescue the concept of truth, while understanding that it is necessary, with each rescue attempt, to modify the concept. For Badiou, truth is not to be understood as correspondence between a proposition and a state of affairs. Truths are immanent exceptions: they arise at a given time and place but are irreducible to their historical context. They represent the emergence of something new and unforeseen – something which from the standpoint of the given world was indeed unforeseeable. What makes Badiou such an important philosopher, an essential thinker of our time, is that he refuses to forfeit the great calling of philosophy, which is to safeguard truth, to safeguard that which makes us Immortal – which is to say, that philosophy bears witness to a new dawn that remains ever on the horizon.

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