

Alain Badiou. *Badiou and the Philosophers: Interrogating 1960s French Philosophy*.

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French intellectual historians have often viewed the mid-1960s as a period in which the prestige and profound significance of G.W.F. Hegel's approach to dialectics was abandoned in favor of a model adopted from structural linguistics. While the existential phenomenologists and Marxist humanists had championed Hegel as the great thinker of consciousness and negativity, the emergent wave of structuralists preferred to describe fundamental conditions of possibility that precede conscious apprehension. However, certain elements of Hegel's influence and reception remained extraordinarily influential throughout this period, despite the apparent dominance of anti-Hegelian thought as developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss, Roland Barthes, Louis Althusser, and Michel Foucault. Attention to this legacy might help us understand the emphatic return to dialectical modes of understanding by Alain Badiou, in the late 1960s and later. This particular Hegelian

adherence, more than his political commitments or mathematical ontology, ties him to a particular trajectory of twentieth-century French thought.

Tzuchien Tho and Giuseppe Bianco's indispensable introduction to the new volume *Badiou and the Philosophers* provides more biographical information on Badiou than has ever been available previously, as well as providing much of the groundwork for contextualizing his very early work in the political, aesthetic and philosophical developments of this extraordinarily rich period. As Tho and Bianco recount, Badiou's work has been characterized by, among other things, consistent admiration for and reformulation of the philosophical project of Jean-Paul Sartre (xiv). At age 17, in 1955, Badiou first read Sartre's early work and decided to become a philosopher as a result (xiii). After writing a letter to Simone de Beauvoir, conveying his appreciation and agreement with her defense of Sartre from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's criticisms, Badiou wrote his first work—not a conventional study of philosophy, but rather a novel, *Almagestes* (xiv). Tho and Bianco describe this somewhat-forgotten accomplishment as maintaining key Sartrian theses while

simultaneously engaging with the concerns of the avant-garde *Tel/Quel* group (xiv). This capacity to reassert the irreducibility of an intentional consciousness lacking in interiority—a negating subject—while convincingly absorbing apparently contrary concerns, such as scientific epistemology and literary formalism, marked Badiou’s efforts. In particular, Badiou was attracted to the Sartre’s later approach to Hegelian Marxism in his monumental work, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*.¹

However, maintaining the commitment to Sartrean themes in the face of seemingly incompatible perspectives required a significant rethinking. In the mid-1960s, Badiou appears torn between political reasons to adhere to Sartre’s problematic (made pressingly apparent in Sartre’s demonstration of commitment in protest to the Algerian war), and simultaneous experiments with thinkers who seem very far removed from this outlook (xvi). For example, Badiou was fascinated by Lévi-Strauss’ classic structuralism, and wrote a dissertation on Spinoza, whose concept of freedom seems almost the antipode of Sartre’s (xvii, xix). In search of a way to preserve

the subject that Sartre had so admirably described, despite his lack of attention to fundamental questions of historicity and structure, Badiou’s contact with Jean Hyppolite was especially significant.

Along with Georges Canguilhem, Hyppolite made his mark as what Badiou later called one of the “protecteurs de la nouveauté;” while serving as director of the École Normale Supérieure, he promoted the new music of Pierre Boulez as well as the innovations of the *nouveau roman* (xxii). As Badiou later put it, “thanks to Hyppolite, the bolts on academic philosophy, which were normally shut tight, were released.”² The core of his philosophical significance was in his innovative re-assertion of Hegel. Badiou even argued that Hyppolite, in translating Hegel, developed an innovative new philosophy.³ Traditionally, Hegel’s influence had been prevented from taking root in French academic philosophy, which meant that his considerable popularity was transmitted outside the university, first in the lectures of Alexandre Kojève and later in the works of

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Rée, New York: Verso, 2004.

2 Alain Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon: Figures of Postwar Philosophy*, trans. David Macey, London: Verso, 2009, 37.

3 Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 38.

Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.⁴

Hyppolite's reading of Hegel, unlike the preceding French Hegelians, de-emphasized the primacy of humanism. While Kojève and Sartre had argued for the distinctly human subject as the locus of freedom and the negation of the given and determined, Hyppolite argued that the fundamental issues could not be circumscribed by the definition of the human.⁵ Arguably, this version of Hegel was crucial in Badiou's preservation dialectics, re-invented in an anti-humanist mode. It could be argued that the French Hegelians of the 1960s all had privileged mediators in order to develop their respective readings. While Guy Debord drew from Georg Lukács' and Henri Lefebvre's humanist Marxist approach, and Jacques Derrida was inspired by Georges Bataille's excessive approach to Hegelian negativity, Badiou's Hegel was

4 See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1980. Merleau-Ponty later declared that all the great philosophical ideas of the past century – the philosophies of Marx and Nietzsche, phenomenology, German existentialism, and psychoanalysis – had their beginnings in Hegel." *Sense and Non-sense*, trans. Hubert and Patricia Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1964, 109-110.

5 On Hyppolite's anti-humanism, see Stefanos Geroulanos, "L'ascension et la marionette : l'homme après Jean Hyppolite," *Jean Hyppolite, entre structure et existence*, ed. Giuseppe Bianco, Paris: Éditions rue d'Ulm, 2013, 83-106.

first transmitted to him by Sartre and subsequently by Hyppolite.⁶ Badiou himself declared that he studied Hyppolite's translation of the *Phenomenology for Spirit* for many years before approaching the German original.⁷

The French reading of Hegel was often inflected by Martin Heidegger's phenomenology. In the 1930s, Kojève remarked that Hegel's atheism and finitude could only be understood through a Heideggerian lens, and Sartre's subsequent approach to Hegelian Marxism remained marked by his prior encounter with the particular emphasis on nothingness found in Heidegger's work.⁸ Hyppolite was distinguished from these predecessors by an even greater commitment to Heidegger's significance, and in particular the emphasis on historicity and fundamental ontology that was previously neglected by French commentators, and the turn towards Being in place of human subjectivity announced in his famous "Letter on Humanism."

6 See Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, New York: Zone, 1995, and Jacques Derrida, "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," *Writing and Difference*, London: Routledge, 2001, 317-351.

7 Badiou, *Pocket Pantheon*, 39.

8 Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, 259.

Heidegger's impact was such that Hyppolite described himself as struck by "Heideggerian lightning" (xxi).

Badiou first corresponded with Hyppolite in 1963, sending him a copy of *Almagestes* and conveying his excitement about Hyppolite's forthcoming work, *Existence et Structure* (xxvii). Clearly, Badiou hoped that Hyppolite would provide the necessary groundwork for a truly contemporary formulation of dialectics. In Badiou's interview with Hyppolite, conducted two years later, we can find a very early record of Badiou's evolving approach to Hegel's significance. We can find Badiou continually intrigued by a Hegelian approach to truth while resisting some of the Heideggerian emphasis on historicity insisted upon by Hyppolite. In a series of televised interviews with major French philosophers, Badiou interviewed Canguilhem, Foucault, Raymond Aron, Paul Ricœur, Michel Henry, and Michel Serres, in addition to Hyppolite. Taken as a whole, this volume reads as a fascinating snapshot of French thought in the mid-1960s, just before the structuralist wave of 1966 produced a less classical brand of "theory." As Tho and Bianco put it, "this collection of interviews is also a representation of the last period where French philosophy as *French*

and as philosophy could still afford to be effortlessly endogamic" (xxx1).

To the extent that Badiou and Hyppolite disagree, it is with regard to the nature of history and historicity; while Hyppolite maintains that mathematics, for example, is unphilosophical in its relation to history, Badiou rejects this thesis (xxxv). Fundamentally, for Hyppolite truths can only be historical, while Badiou will strive towards a notion of truth that overcomes history (xxxvi). As Hyppolite puts it, "When we contemplate a system of philosophy, it is the path taken by the philosopher, it is the manner in which she gains access to truth, and it is also the way that she touches it [truth] of course!" (5). Rather than a history of error, for Hyppolite, "the philosophical systems of the past represent a first degree of thinking" (3-4). In Hyppolite's definition of philosophy, it is an "existent metaphysical thinking" that links "a matter and a form" (4). For him, philosophy can think being and content, while mathematics and logic are purely formal (4).

For Hyppolite, each philosopher uncovers a fundamental truth within his own epoch, and cannot be falsified (6). Badiou,

however, raises the question of Aristotle's justification of slavery. Hyppolite agrees that this example demands the consideration of the "existential roots" of a philosophy (6-7). He declares that while philosophy cannot be reduced to ideology, it must be seen as related dialectically to the non-philosophical roots that sustain it (7). While Hyppolite insists on philosophy as embedded in its time, Badiou counters that this understanding of "history" has little to do with the ordinary connotations of this word, to such a degree that it is dispensable (7). Hyppolite argues that a historical understand of philosophy and being must reveal the possibility of a multiplicity of understandings of being, and even those that are opposed to one another; as he puts it, "the nature of being should be such that it renders this diversity or even this opposition between philosophical systems possible" (9). Badiou responds to this amalgamation of Hegel and Heidegger by emphasizing the significance of Marx, and the non-Marxist conclusions that Hyppolite has drawn. In response, Hyppolite replies that the relations of production and their technical conditions must be considered as among the non-philosophical roots of the various historical philosophies. Fundamentally, then, the disagreement between

Hyppolite and Badiou is the former's tendency towards a historical relativism, in contrast to Badiou's desire to posit truth's attaining of an absolute. However, Hyppolite insists that Plato is perhaps the crucial philosopher, suggesting that some philosophies may provide the keys to others (10). This anticipates Badiou's own famous insistence of the importance of Plato, against various modern anti-Platonic movements.

In a subsequent discussion conducted for the television series, Hyppolite and Badiou return to many of these issues, in conversation with Dina Dreyfus, Foucault, Canguilhem, and Ricœur (79). Hyppolite and Canguilhem express total agreement, which is surprising given the Hegelian commitments of the former and the scientific epistemology of the latter (81). They are in accord on the question of a multiplicity of truths, which Canguilhem finds proven by his historical inquiries and Hyppolite supports on the basis of his readings of Hegel and Heidegger. Foucault affirms the suggestion that while science aims to produce a single explanation, philosophy must rely on a polysemic notion of truths (85). From a twenty-first century perspective, it may appear that the distinction between Badiou and

these other great philosophers of the 1960s was his resistance to a discourse inspired by Heidegger's multiplicity of pathways and his obstinate commitment to axioms that cannot be historicized.

Rather than Heidegger, Badiou would pursue a complex and unusual approach to Hegel and Marx that he believed mirrored some of the insights of the Chinese thought of the time. In his a volume produced in the mid-1970s, *The Rational Kernel of the Hegelian Dialectic*, Badiou aimed to assert the universality of these ideas by placing them in relation to the analysis of Zhang Shi Ying, a Chinese Hegelian Marxist. In his demanding and groundbreaking *Theory of the Subject*, a series of seminars conducted from 1975 to 1979, Badiou continued to expand an anti-historicist and anti-humanist approach to dialectics as a destructive negation of its conditions. Read in context, this new approach to novelty and changed is indebted to both Sartre and Hyppolite.

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