

## FROM UNIVERSALITY TO EQUALITY: BADIOU'S CRITIQUE OF RANCIÈRE

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*Alain Badiou argues in "Rancière and Apolitics" that Rancière has appropriated his central idea of equality from Badiou's own work. We argue that Badiou's characterisation of Rancière's project is correct, but that his self-characterisation is mistaken. What Badiou's ontology of events opens out onto is not necessarily equality, but instead universality. Equality is only one form of universality, but there is nothing in Badiou's thought that prohibits the (multiple) universality he posits from being hierarchical. In the end, then, Badiou's thought moves in a Maoist direction while Rancière's in an anarchist one.*

There are few more urgent tasks in our world than those concerning the thought and practice of politics. We are faced everywhere with oppression, exploitation, genocide, environmental degradation, and racism. Yet, we cast about for proper responses, both intellectual and practical. Although this is not the place for discussing the proper relation (or *dis-jointure*) between theory and practice, we can at least recognise there is a live question of how to think progressive politics: how to conceive a politics that would be (or is) recognisably left in character. This is not to say that there are no such conceptions afloat. Rather, it is to claim that the field, although occupied, remains an open one, at least since the demise of Marxism as the dominant framework for progressive thought.

Two of the most prominent recent thinkers of progressive politics are Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière. In contrast to thinkers like Michel Foucault, they offer more encompassing conceptual frameworks for conceiving progressive politics. And, in contrast to thinkers like Jacques Derrida, their frameworks reflect their own practical engagements; their work is more deeply rooted in political history and struggle. Given their common embrace of progressive politics, one might assume (or hope) that there would be some sort of intellectual alliance between them. There has not been, however. From the realm of aesthetics to that

of politics, Badiou and Rancière have found themselves in one sort of disagreement or another.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, we would like to focus on a particular disagreement and on a particular writing. The writing is Badiou's "Rancière and Apolitics,"<sup>2</sup> and the disagreement concerns equality. Essentially, Badiou makes two claims in his essay. First, Rancière has essentially lifted his (Badiou's) political orientation, largely without attribution. Second, without the philosophical background that Badiou supplies, that orientation is politically inert. We will focus primarily on the first claim, not only because we believe it is mistaken, but also because understanding the mistake it involves goes to the heart of the difference between Badiou's political approach and Rancière's. To anticipate, we argue that Badiou's political approach does not concern the equality Rancière embraces in any deep sense. Rather, it concerns universality, which, although it has some affinities with equality, is distinct from the more radical equality envisioned by Rancière. The upshot of this is that while Badiou's political commitments often run toward the more hierarchical (i.e., his Maoism), Rancière's politics is steadfastly egalitarian and, in a certain sense at least, anarchist. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss, we should note that we believe that Badiou's political commitments remain rooted in discredited models of Marxist thought and practice, while Rancière's egalitarianism reflects the best of recent progressive politics (e.g., the anti-globalisation movement or the Zapatista rebellion) and offers the better framework for conceiving future progressive politics.

The paper will proceed in three stages. First, we will briefly reprise Badiou's critique of Rancière in his essay. Second, we will discuss Badiou's ontology, particularly as it appears in *Being and Event*, showing how the political event is a matter of universality rather than equality. Finally, we will turn to Rancière, showing how his commitment to radical equality contrasts with the universality of Badiou's conception.

"Rancière and Apolitics" assumes a polemical tone. At the outset, Badiou writes, "I can say, along with a few others, that I recognise

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<sup>1</sup> For their disagreements regarding aesthetics, see, for example, Rancière's critique of Badiou's aesthetics in "Aesthetics, Inaesthetics, Anti-aesthetics," in (ed.) Peter Hallward, *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2004 (essay or. pub. 2002)), 218–31.

<sup>2</sup> In *Metapolitics*, tr. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005 (or. pub. 1998)).

myself in important parts of Rancière's work. And all the more so since I have the literally justifiable feeling of having anticipated, along with a few others, these parts."<sup>3</sup> Essentially, the "anticipated" parts are the state of the situation as the counting of parts and the event as a nomination. In other words, Rancière has copied Badiou's conceptions both of domination and resistance. Regarding the first, "As far as the notion of domination is concerned—or the counting of parts of a whole as substructure of the unequal—this I named not long ago, in my own jargon, 'the state of the situation' and Rancière names 'the police.'"<sup>4</sup>

In *Being and Event*, Badiou offers a set theoretical conception of ontology. The set theoretical conception requires a double counting, in which what appears can only appear because of this double counting. The first counting is that of the situation and its structure. "I term *situation* any presented multiplicity.... Every situation admits of its own particular operator of the count-as-one. This is the most general definition of a *structure*; it is what prescribes, for a presented multiple, the regime of its count-as-one."<sup>5</sup> The state of the situation doubles the count. In set theoretical terms, it is the power set of the count of the situation, counting all subsets of that situation. "I will hereafter term *state of the situation* that by means of which the structure of a situation—of any structured presentation whatsoever—is counted as one."<sup>6</sup> The state of the situation dominates in the situation in a particular way: what can be counted must be counted by the state of the situation. Otherwise, both literally and metaphorically, it does not count. Whatever is not counted by the state of the situation does not exist, in the sense that it cannot be recognised by those inhabiting the situation. We return to these concepts in more depth below.

Badiou's claim is that Rancière's definition of the police, discussed primarily in *Disagreement*, operates largely the same way. In that work, Rancière defines the police as follows: "Politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution. I propose to

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<sup>3</sup> "Rancière and Apolitics", 116.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, tr. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005 (or. pub. 1988)), 24.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

give this system of distribution and legitimization another name. I propose to call it *the police*.”<sup>7</sup> One might, at first glance, wonder what the supposed overlap is in these definitions. One concerns counting, the other distribution and legitimisation. The overlap, in Badiou’s view, is invoked by Rancière through his appeal to the concept of counting at the outset of *Disagreement*, in his discussion of Aristotle. In Rancière’s reading of Aristotle, the mass of people, the *demos*, is identified with freedom, in contrast to the wealth of the smallest number and the excellence of the best. However, freedom is not a quality, and as a result, the *demos* is not really counted. Their identification is with a void. Therefore, to assert themselves is to dispute the counting performed by an Aristotelian view of the polis. Rancière writes, “It is through the existence of this part of those who have no part, of this nothing that is all [because freedom is the characteristic of everyone, while wealth and excellence are not—our note], that the community exists as a political community—that is, as divided by a fundamental dispute, by a dispute to do with the counting of the community’s parts even more than of their ‘rights.’”<sup>8</sup>

Badiou’s claim, then, is that Rancière’s reading of Aristotle leads him to think of distribution and legitimisation in terms of counting. Since tropes of the counting of the uncounted and the part that has no part appear often in *Disagreement*, one might be tempted to follow Badiou’s assimilation here. However, as Badiou himself notes, things are more complicated than that. We will return to the point in a moment.

The other “anticipated” part of Badiou’s work concerns what Badiou calls the event, and in particular the nomination of the event. “Everything hinges on the nominal summoning, through an event, of a sort of central void procedure of a situation stratified by a counting procedure.”<sup>9</sup> The event concerns resistance. Roughly, we might think of it this way. There is always something in a situation, specifically a historical (as opposed to a natural) situation, that has not been counted by the state of the situation. It is a void for that state. An event, whether artistic, scientific, amorous, or political, presents that void, testifies to it, makes it appear. In doing so, and for reasons outside the scope of this

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<sup>7</sup> *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, tr. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999 (or. pub. 1995)), 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>9</sup> “Rancière and Apolitics”, 116.

paper, it names that void. In naming the void (or that particular void) of the situation, it seeks to force recognition of it by those inhabiting the situation. For example, when someone refers to a series of strikes and clashes as a “revolution,” s/he is claiming that they are not part of the normal course of things—the state of the situation—but rather constitute something new and previously absent from or invisible to the situation.

Rancière’s equivalent to Badiou’s nomination would be the counting of the uncounted. For instance, when Rancière refers in *Disagreement* to the 1832 trial of Auguste Blanqui, he cites Blanqui’s insistence on calling himself a proletarian in the face of the judge’s refusal to recognise proletarian as a profession. Rancière writes that “proletarian does not designate any occupation whatever...[but] a profession of faith, a declaration of membership in a collective.”<sup>10</sup> This would be precisely an attempt to count the uncounted by means of the introduction of a particular form of nomination.

It would seem, then, that, in Badiou’s eyes, Rancière’s conception of politics—as a resistance to domination that is a counting of the uncounted—is a direct descendant of Badiou’s own thought. One might go further, although Badiou does not, in seeing the similarities between Badiou’s and Rancière’s conceptions of political subjectivity as that which arises through the event. However, as Badiou also points out, there are important differences between his view and Rancière’s. These differences are ultimately philosophical failings on Rancière’s part, failings that have political implications.

Although Rancière has lifted Badiou’s political conception, he does so without referring to Badiou’s founding ontology. This is not a mere skimming of the surface. It involves, in Badiou’s eyes, two fundamental political errors.<sup>11</sup> First, by failing to offer a founding ontology, Rancière fails to see the role of the state of the situation, and of the State generally, in politics. “One will observe that Rancière avoids the word ‘State,’ preferring alternatives of the ‘society’ or ‘police’ type.”<sup>12</sup> This, ultimately, issues out in Rancière’s failing to challenge the political state itself. Rancière, in Badiou’s view, fails to challenge parliamentary poli-

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<sup>10</sup> *Disagreement*, 37–8.

<sup>11</sup> He actually lists four, but two of them are errors of ontological conception. The other two, the second and fourth, are political errors that stem from them.

<sup>12</sup> “Rancière and Apolitics”, 119.

tics. Second, by neglecting the ontology of political processes, Rancière neglects the role of the militant, the one or ones who recognise the appearance of an event and who remain faithful to it. “Rancière fails to say that every political process, even in the sense in which he understands it, manifests itself as an *organised* process. He has a tendency to pit phantom masses against an unnamed State. But the real situation demands instead that we pit a few rare political militants against the ‘democratic’ hegemony of the parliamentary State.”<sup>13</sup> In short, Rancière’s lack of philosophical rigour is mirrored in his failure to recognise the political rigour of resistance. Resistance is a militant activity, not simply a blind expression of mass discontent.

How shall we assess this picture of Rancière’s politics? Is Rancière really Badiou-light? We think not. Rancière is neither Badiou nor light. To anticipate, Badiou’s embrace of rigour is, in fact, an embrace of universality as opposed to the democratic equality of Rancière. What looks to Badiou like philosophical and political rigour is in fact a *different conception* of politics. It is not that Rancière fails to see politics clearly because he “takes no risk to ensure the speculative cohesion of the requisite categories (whole, void, nomination, remainder, etc.), and only instills them with a sort of historicist phenomenology of the egalitarian occurrence.”<sup>14</sup> It is rather that Badiou’s ontology issues out into a distinct politics, one that does not in fact achieve the egalitarianism of Rancière’s approach.

### **Badiou’s Ontology of the Universal**

According to Badiou, a philosophically informed politics must dwell on the universal, for philosophy “consists of the analysis and examination of ... universalities.”<sup>15</sup> Note the usage of the plural. This usage is telling because Badiou thinks the universal on two separate levels. On the one hand, Badiou gives an account of the origin and characteristics of the universal that is shaped by his conception of ontology. In this account he makes it absolutely clear that the universal can be plural, that there are

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 121–2.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 251.

different sorts of universalities linked together by conformity to a specific array of purely formal criteria. On the other hand, Badiou indicates that the primary task of philosophy is not merely to give an account of the universal but also to provide a conceptual site in which universalities may be brought together. This bringing together permits a synoptic expression of what it means to think the universal at a given time, revealing Badiou's adherence to the Hegelian maxim that philosophy expresses the thinking of a particular epoch.

There is a lot to unpack here, and we should like to go about doing so by adhering to this framework. Accordingly, we shall first set out briefly the main features of Badiou's account of the universal, which will require a thumbnail sketch of important aspects of Badiou's philosophy, and then move on to a discussion of Badiou's view of philosophy as a discourse of and about the universal, particularly in relation to the notion of the subject implicated in that discourse.

### **The Universal as Truth**

Badiou asserts that the universal and the truth are strictly equivalent: there is no universal that is not true and no truth that is not universal.<sup>16</sup> This seems like a fairly traditional position, and when Badiou aligns himself affirmatively with Plato, fears arise that the alignment heralds a return to an already discredited metaphysics. But, since this is emphatically not the case, we shall take some care to explain the equation of truth and the universal as Badiou formulates it.

The grounding term is truth. What, then, is truth for Badiou? Truth denotes an assertion within any one of what Badiou refers to as the four generic truth procedures, those of mathematics, art, politics and love. Any truth must then be a truth of and in one of the four procedures. Truth emerges from a situation within one of these procedures, which can be a situation in mathematics, say, set theory, in art, say, that of the novel, in politics, say, that of illegal immigrants, and so on.

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<sup>16</sup> See Badiou's "Eight Theses on the Universal" in *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and tr. by R. Brassier and A. Toscano (London: Continuum, 2005), 143–52. Also relevant here is the distinction Badiou draws in his *Ethics* between a genuine truth-founding event and its simulacrum, a distinction that turns completely on the degree of universality involved. See Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, tr. P. Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 72–7.

Badiou's concept of a situation is of course based on set theory. He maintains that a situation is "any presented multiplicity," an infinite assemblage of infinite multiples, "the most general definition of structure."<sup>17</sup> Infinite multiples are presented in the situation as elements or terms; that is merely to say that they are counted within, or belong to, it. Badiou also maintains that every situation has a meta-structure, or state, which counts that count. The counting effected by the state is a decisive operation; it defines the character of the situation by determining the way in which elements are to be counted for inclusion in the state. An element belonging to the situation is only included in the situation's state if that inclusion is authorised by the count.

The operation of counting effected by the state is an attempt to carve out a collection of identities (subsets) from an infinite multiplicity of elements such that every element is included in the state; in other words, such that every element presented in the situation is re-presented in the state. But, there is an intractable problem here, and it has to do with the impossibility of the state's being able to include every element presented in the situation.

The reason for this impossibility is quite simple: it arises from the fact that a set of elements always produces—in accordance with the axiom of the power set<sup>18</sup>—a number of subsets greater than the elements from which the subsets are derived. In the case of an infinite set, this excess of subsets over elements must be infinite as well. Thus, it should be clear that the state's attempt to prescribe the limits of permissible subsets through the count must fail, since an infinite multiplicity of elements produces an infinitely greater multiplicity of subsets: no one state of a situation can adequately delimit, and thus govern, the situation. There is always an ungovernable "excess" which the state has of necessity excluded from the count.

This excess is crucial for our purposes, since it is the birthplace of truth. The state of the situation ensures that no excess is "visible." That is to say: every element presented in the situation is re-presented in the state. Yet, this seamless harmony can only be purchased at the cost of repression through exclusion of an intolerable, infinite excess. And this excess returns in the form of an event giving birth to a truth, that truth

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<sup>17</sup> *Being and Event*, 24.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 81–92.

being both of and in the situation in so far as it signals the return of the repressed.

An event is anomalous within the context of the state: it has no status or, more precisely, its belonging to the situation is, from the point of view of the state, strictly undecidable. Because the event's status within the situation cannot be decided according to the count effected by the state, the event requires an intervention. The latter, a decision that there is an event, must be made without reference to what the state of the situation authorises as lawful through the count; intervention thereby establishes the basis for what Badiou calls fidelity, a radical pursuit of self-representation, a resolve to act as if the event belonged to the situation. The most important and distinctive aspect of declaring the event is that this declaration founds a truth process tracing how militants protest their fidelity to the event by investigating the relation of its truth to other elements in the situation. This investigation is infinite; it never conclusively determines that the event belongs to the situation in which it arose.

Now, what does this investigation have to do with the universal? If the truth is universal, and the universal is true, then the truth process is also a process "of" the universal. Militants declare the universality of the truth to which they bear witness, the "proof" of which, however, is a task, which Badiou regards as the infinite task of verifying the truth.<sup>19</sup> The universal stands, thus, as an active *project* whose guiding belief is expressed in the future anterior, a tricky, uncomfortable tense in English: the militant's fidelity maintains that the event will have been true and universal in the situation.

Hence, one might suppose that the universal never has the status of being in the situation, since it does not conform to the legality, the count of the count, that governs the order of being relevant to the situation and its state, the order of both belonging and inclusion. According to this argument, the universal is universal precisely because it can and does not conform to this legality and, therefore, may appeal to all elements in the situation, regardless of their status, their identity for the state. What the universal lacks in legitimacy in the situation, namely, both belonging to the situation and inclusion in its state, is the necessary condition of its universality: the impossibility of conforming the universal to the legality of the state is its condition of possibility.

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<sup>19</sup> See "On Subtraction" in *Theoretical Writings* (London: Continuum, 2005), 112.

Such a patently Derridean response is, however, utterly contrary to Badiou's way of thinking. For Badiou, there simply is no democracy to come, no present promise of ever elusive future fulfillment. Badiou insists on the positive ontological status of truth and the universal. This is no doubt one of his most radical contentions, which he defends by means of an ingenious notion, the generic subset, a set of elements said to belong to the situation even though they cannot be definitively counted within it. The generic subset is, strictly speaking, indiscernible in the situation with respect to the count effected by the state.

But, recognition of indiscernability within the situation entails that the generic subset must be in some manner discernibly indiscernible: it is *as* that which is other than what is within the situation, and this kind of being is unquestionably positive, exposing the truth the state of the situation must conceal, the pure, infinite multiple being that is the ontological "raw material" of the situation (and, indeed, of every situation). For the state, then, the generic subset is an identity that describes non-identity, an infinite set that "contains a little bit of everything,"<sup>20</sup> a subset that resists definitive predication.

Such universality includes all and none: it overcomes the ascriptions of unity involved in both those predicates, this being the distinctive characteristic of the generic set. Badiou treads a fine line with this conception of the universal, however, that is, arguably, not as innovative as it may seem. While the mathematical language through which Badiou develops his concept of the universal is of considerable interest, it does not disguise the fact that the possibility of there being a universal still seems to rely, when all is said and done, on a more fundamental impossibility, and may thus still fall prey to the kind of paradox in which Derrida delights with far greater playfulness and irony.

In any case, it is clear that Badiou wants to give an ontological status to universality that defeats the traditional objections to the universal. For Badiou the universal has being, if that being is necessarily indeterminate.

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<sup>20</sup> *Being and Event*, 371.

### **Philosophy as the (Meta-)Discourse of Universality**

Badiou conceives of philosophy not as creating a universality, not as a discourse in which universality originates, but as a sort of maieutic, classificatory discourse, that identifies truths and tries to weave them together with other truths. Philosophy seeks only to provide a site of compossibility in regard to the various truths that emerge within the four truth procedures.<sup>21</sup> Now, philosophy opens this site by means of “operators.” The crucial modern operator is the subject. Put briefly, but hardly simply, the site of compossibility of truths and universals is the subject. It is important to note that the subject is not somehow above or beyond these truths, it is not their “carrier.” Instead, the subject is quite literally a subject of truth; for an individual only becomes a subject by resolving to act in fidelity to a truth, a universal. The subject is a militant for the truth whose task is to realise the connections of the truth of the event with the situation in which it emerges.

This militant concept of the subject, and those of truth and the universal which define it, have the effect of dividing the situation into militants for the universal, genuine subjects, and all others: as Badiou says, the one becomes two.<sup>22</sup> Badiou claims that the universal appeals to all, which it indeed must, but his adherence to the universal is nonetheless inherently divisive, creating an opposition, and a supposition of conflict between militants of the truth and all others in a situation. For the universal, despite its appeal to all, requires a division of the situation into two, thereby creating enmity from the outset between those who swear fidelity to the truth and those who do not, the former being notionally superior because they have chosen to be subjects of the truth, to join the elect.

Hence, at the same time as Badiou inscribes an ostensibly egalitarian universality into the situation, the very means by which that universality is inscribed therein creates a difference that militates against any supposition of equality. Indeed, since the subject of the truth adheres to a universal that must be indiscernible in the situation, that subject must speak in a way that others in the situation cannot even understand *unless*

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<sup>21</sup> *Manifesto for Philosophy*, tr. N. Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 38.

<sup>22</sup> *Being and Event*, 237.

they first accept the truth: “the situated universality of a political statement can only be experienced through the militant practice that effectuates it.”<sup>23</sup> This exclusivity shows the gulf between the militant subject of truth and others in a given situation, a gulf that imposes an inequality of understanding which tends to belie any apparent universality of mere indeterminate belonging, what Badiou calls the “egalitarian and anonymous for-all.”<sup>24</sup>

An illustration of this gulf is offered by Badiou in his recent work *Logiques des mondes*, in a reading of Mao’s approach to the Cultural Revolution. The fact that Badiou embraces any aspect of the Cultural Revolution should give one pause.<sup>25</sup> However, Badiou finds much to admire in Mao’s attempt to overcome the State through the Cultural Revolution. This overcoming can be seen in a direct lineage with Badiou’s critique of Rancière as failing to provide a critique of the State, noted earlier.

Badiou remarks that Mao is not loath to embrace the idea of terror, a term that occurs at the level of the State, but that is a reflection of social antagonisms. Badiou writes:

The situation being one of an absolute antagonism, it is important to hold:  
—that every individual is identified with his choice;  
—that non-choice is a (reactive) choice;  
—that (political) life takes the form of a civil war, and is also an exposure to death;  
—that, finally, all individuals from a particular political camp are substitutable one for another: a living one can replace a dead one.

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<sup>23</sup> “Eight Theses on the Universal”, 143.

<sup>24</sup> “*Le pour-tous égalitaire anonyme*” in “*Alain Badiou: L’aveu du philosophe*” Centre International d’Études de la Philosophie Française Contemporaine ([http://ciepfc.rhapsodyk.net/article.php3?id\\_article=40](http://ciepfc.rhapsodyk.net/article.php3?id_article=40)), November 11, 2004.

<sup>25</sup> For Badiou, it is only the early months of the Cultural Revolution that are worth endorsing. See, for example, “The Cultural Revolution: The Last Revolution?” in Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, tr. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006 (essay or. pub. 2003)), 291–321.

We can understand then how it is possible for the Great Secretary in legal matters to combine an absolute authoritarianism with a principled [*principiel*] egalitarianism.<sup>26</sup>

Equality, then, is not something that arises as a principle of action. Rather, it is recognised and created by the militants of an event. Badiou further clarifies this when he writes, “Equality is that each can return to his choice not to his position.”<sup>27</sup> Equality is not a presupposition of political action. It is, instead, the result of the action of militants that have opened up a space for “the people” to enjoy equality. When Badiou accuses Rancière of neglecting the role of the militant, then, we see that what is at stake is not only a conception of militancy but also a particular conception of politics: a politics of universality that can open out onto equality as one of its stakes. That conception contrasts sharply with a conception of politics that operates from the *presupposition* of equality, an equality that is more anarchist than Maoist in inspiration.

### **Rancière: From Universality to Equality**

“[P]olitical activity is always a mode of expression that undoes the perceptible divisions of the police order by implementing a basically heterogeneous assumption, that of a part of those who have no part, an assumption that, at the end of the day, itself demonstrates the sheer contingency of the order, the equality of any speaking being with any other speaking being.”<sup>28</sup> In this citation, we glimpse the core of Rancière’s conception of politics. Does politics arise within a police order that has affinities with Badiou’s conception of the state of a situation? Yes. Does it involve a count of the uncounted? Yes. Does that count involve a subjectification that often has a particular nomination? Yes. What, then, distinguishes Rancière’s political conception from Badiou’s? The heterogeneous assumption of the equality of every speaking being with every other speaking being.

If the early months of the Cultural Revolution provide a touchstone for Badiou’s politics, for Rancière it is a tale of a plebeian revolt in

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<sup>26</sup> *Logique des mondes* (Paris: Seuil: 2006), 34.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>28</sup> *Disagreement*, 30.

ancient Rome that stands as exemplary. Rancière refers to an 1829 series of articles by Pierre-Simon Ballanche reinterpreting Livy's tale of the revolt of plebeians of the Aventine Hill. In the tale, the plebeians rebel and, according to Livy, are returned to order by the intervention of Menenius Agrippa. Ballanche argues that Livy has missed the point of his own tale. The patricians in this story do not listen to the complaints of the plebeians, for the simple reason that the plebeians have nothing to say, and would not understand the words of the patricians anyway. However, Menenius goes to the plebeians to talk with them. In doing so, he violates the police order, and in fact engages in a performative contradiction. In explaining to the plebs why they must return to the old order, he assumes they can hear and engage with his speech, and thus violate the presupposition of that order—that they have nothing to say and are incapable of considering his words.

This tale may or may not be true, as told by Livy or re-told by Ballanche. However, a more contemporary and undoubtedly true example is not far to seek. During the U.S. civil rights movement, there were a series of lunch-counter sit-ins. African Americans and whites would go to whites-only sections of restaurants and sit down with the intention of ordering lunch. They were refused service, and were often beaten and arrested. However, if we look at their actions, they are an illustration of Rancière's approach to politics. The activists in these sit-ins presupposed that they were equal to anyone else and, therefore, had the right to order lunch, like white folks. They presupposed that they would be understood and that, therefore, their orders could be taken. In fact, those who taunted them more or less presupposed the same thing. After all, if the protestors were incapable of ordering lunch, how could they understand what was being said to them by those who taunted them?

Politics, for Rancière, is collective action that starts from the presupposition of equality. Every participant in a political movement is equal, both to those who declare or assume or act as though those participants were less than equal—those better situated in the hierarchy of a police order—and to one another as well. The division of politics into militants and everyone else does not occur, or at least does not occur in the same way, in Rancière's thought as it does in Badiou's. As we have seen, Badiou's ontology is Platonic. There are truths that are universal, and those who grasp these truths are the militants. Militants can teach others, those who do not know. And they can struggle against others

still, those who refuse to know. But the avant-garde aspect of politics characteristic of Badiou's Maoism is central, if not, as we will suggest below, necessary to his thought, and it contrasts and at times clashes with the presupposition of equality that animates Rancière's political conception.

This is because—and here Badiou is more nearly correct than he knows—Badiou has an ontology Rancière lacks, a philosophical conception of Being Rancière refuses to endorse. If Being is as Badiou conceives it, then there is necessarily an excess to every situation that cannot be counted by the state of the situation. Militants, through their activity, bring that excess out, display it as a break with the state of the situation. This, it would seem, would often require a subtle grasp of what is hidden by the state of the situation, a grasp reserved for those who are capable of it. Lenin, Mao: these are figures capable of grasping the excess that eludes a situation. They must grasp this excess, and then lead others to it. This is why politics, if its goal is equality, does not necessarily start from that presupposition.

It is no accident, then, that the political figures Rancière invokes in his work—except for those he criticises—have largely been forgotten by recent history. In his early book *The Nights of Labor*, the central character is the floor-layer Gabriel Gauny;<sup>29</sup> in “The Myth of the Artisan,” Gauny is joined by several others, including the stone mason and poet Charles Poncy.<sup>30</sup> Even the name of Auguste Blanqui, although he enjoyed some fame in his time, does not occupy the same place in political thought as Lenin or Mao. This difference reflects a deeper difference in political conceptions. For Rancière, there is nothing ontological to be understood, and politics is not an ontological matter. Like Foucault, Rancière tends to historicise and politicise the ontological, rather than the other way around. Therefore, political activity does not require grasping an ontological excess. It requires only the presupposition of equality, the recognition that *we* are equal to those others who consider us less than equal. Of course, it is political activity itself that creates this *we*. However, that activity is not the product of anything ontological. It is the

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<sup>29</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor: The Workers' Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, tr. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989 (or. pub. 1981)).

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Rancière, “The Myth of the Artisan”, tr. David H. Lake and Cynthia J. Koepp, in Stephen L. Kaplan and Cynthia J. Koepp (eds.), *Work in France: Representations, Meaning, Organization, and Practice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 317–34.

product of a simple assumption, or better of two simple assumptions: that each of us is equal to one another, and that in the current order we are assumed to be less than equal to some others.

Does this mean that while Badiou embraces universality as his central term, Rancière opts for equality? This would be too simple a contrast, and for two reasons. First, for Rancière, equality has a universal aspect to it. Second, for Badiou, universality can be a matter of equality, even though his thought often cuts against it. We need to investigate both of these reasons.

Rancière calls politics “the art of the local and singular constructions of cases of universality.”<sup>31</sup> In what sense does the presupposition of equality characteristic of political activity construct a universality? The dynamic here has a dual character. To act as though one were equal to another is, first, to claim oneself as equal to another and, in that way, to construct a universality of equality. But it is also, as it were, to put a claim of equality on the public table. It is to face others with that claim, to force them either to endorse or to deny it. It is to say with one’s actions, “Contrary to the assumptions of the current police order, we are equal to you. Where do you stand?” Those in the hierarchy are faced then with either two choices: to endorse the presupposition and to change the police order, or to deny the presupposition.

However, to deny the equality of speaking beings in our period is not so easy. The claim “everyone is equal” is as close as one gets, in our day and age, to a political truism. The presupposition of equality, although often denied in practice, is almost universally held in principle. When political action appeals to equality, it is appealing to a value that is almost universally accorded lip service, at the very least. This is not to say that the value of equality is an absolute or that it has always been recognised. Far from it. When the Roman plebeians made their claim at the Aventine Hill (if, indeed, that’s what happened), they constructed a universality that had no resonance in their contemporary police order. If there was a universality, it was created through their actions. Strictly speaking, they constructed a universality where there was none, first in acting as though they were equals and second in forcing Menenius to treat them as such. In the contemporary period, however, to construct a universality from the presupposition of equality is at the same time to

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<sup>31</sup> *Disagreement*, 139.

appeal to a value that already has a nearly universal endorsement. Therefore, the local constructions of universality are confrontations with a police order in the name of a value already having universal appeal.

In either case—the ancient case of constructing universality from scratch or the contemporary case of constructing universality in practice—there is a contrast between Rancière’s approach and Badiou’s. For Rancière, confrontation occurs in the name of a value. There is no ontology here. One recognises equality or one does not. One might characterise those denied the recognition of equality in a police order as an excess, and one would not be wrong. They are within the situation, but are uncounted in that situation. However, the counting, if it is to occur, is a counting as equal, and one that arises on the basis of a political movement that, in its egalitarianism, confronts the police order with that value as a universal one.

We can see here, then, the other side of the coin. If Rancière’s presupposition of equality is the construction of a universality, so the universality of a truth in Badiou’s sense can be had in the name of equality. One might, for instance, read the civil rights example cited above in this manner. Those participants in the lunch-counter sit-ins were militants for a truth: the truth of the equality of anyone and everyone. They displayed a fidelity to that truth, over and against the state of the situation for which some are less than equal. In doing so, they decided an undecidable within the situation, and thus became militants of an event.

This description would not be wrong. We can read action out of the presupposition of equality as a form of militant political activity, in accordance with Badiou’s conception. What distinguishes Rancière’s conception of politics from Badiou’s is that for Rancière, this is the *only* type of politics that really counts as such, the only politics that would merit the name *democratic*. For Badiou, Rancièrian politics would be one type of politics among others. And, returning to his essay on Rancière, it is a type of politics that, by not strictly delineating the figure of the militant, is often an inferior one. Using Badiou’s terminology, we might say that Rancièrian politics is a subset of Badiouan politics, where the figure of the militant that would create profound political change often goes missing. By introducing an ontological structure undergirding political activity, Badiou opens the door to the avant-garde figure, the militant who, in contrast to the masses, understands and can articulate the missing truth of a situation, in short, the Leninist or the Maoist.

Although in his recent work Badiou seeks to articulate a politics without a party,<sup>32</sup> he has never embraced the idea of an anarchist conception of politics. Rancière, to the contrary, has not shied away from utilising the term anarchism. In a recent work, he writes, “Democracy first of all means this: anarchic ‘government,’ one based on nothing other than the absence of every title to rule.”<sup>33</sup> For him anarchism means a politics of anyone and everyone that occurs on the basis of an-archy, an absence of a principle of entitlement to rule.

At the outset, we said that we would not defend one conception of politics against another. However, our sympathies are clearly with Rancière’s conception of politics. Although we will not argue for them, we will close with a warning that can stand as a coda for all avant-gardist politics. In 1873, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin watched the rise of Marx’s politics with increasing concern. He made a prediction, forty-four years before the Russian Revolution, regarding what would happen if people followed an avant-garde politics of the kind Marx proposed.

Now it is clear why the *doctrinaire revolutionaries*, whose objective is to overthrow existing governments and regimes so as to create their

dictatorship on their ruins, have never been and will never be enemies of the state. On the contrary, they have always been and will always be its most ardent defenders...they are the most impassioned friends of state power, for were it not retained, the

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<sup>32</sup> “As we have been repeating for several years, the question worth highlighting is one of a politics without party, which in no sense means unorganised, but rather one organised through the intellectual discipline of political processes, and not according to a form correlated with that of the state.” “Rancière and APolitics”, 122.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Hatred of Democracy*, tr. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006 (or. pub. 2005)), 41.

revolution, having liberated the masses in earnest, would eliminate this pseudo-revolutionary minority's hope of putting a new harness on them and conferring on them the blessings of their own governmental measures.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Bakunin, *Statism and Anarchy*, tr. M. Shatz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 137.