

## **Alain Badiou, or the War of the Infinite**

**(A critical reading of *The Immanence of Truths*)**

The thesis developed by Alain Badiou throughout his entire philosophical oeuvre - whose generic title, *Being and Event*, covers three large volumes : *Being and Event* (1988), *Logics of worlds* (2006), *The Immanence of Truths* (2018) - can be summed up as follows :

*Truths are at stake in the war waged within us by infinities, otherwise known as Ideas. The hierarchy of Ideas is established like that of numerical infinities. An Idea can only reveal a Truth - singular, universal, absolute - if it is inaccessible to the established order - because it cannot be deduced from what is already known, because it cannot be constructed. It is then invulnerable, in the long term, to the oppression of the state and academic culture, invulnerable to any attempt to cover it with a constructible infinite, therefore of lesser magnitude. It will constantly reappear in the finite, point by point, in the form of works, until its advent before the eyes of all, in the near historical future, which will constitute a decisive advance towards human happiness on Earth. In the meantime, the Truth of the work - revealed, in the eyes of a few, by its index finger, the stigma of the event exception - is Truth only in the future anterior, "at the risk and peril of the work" : its effective verification as Truth will only take place when it comes to the eyes of all. For Truth to prevail historically, the magnitude of its infinity must be greater than the magnitude of the infinity of which the established order, in this domain, is capable - which is constructible infinity. Its momentary, epochal failure reveals the current numerical weakness of the faithful Subject that sustains it, and all the work still to be accomplished by the Idea through the works it gives rise to. Weak, constructible infinities*

*produce nothing but waste in the finite. From the great infinities, inaccessible, unthinkable by the established order, revealing a Truth, the result for us, in the finite, is works. The universal advent of the densest of infinities, the one that comes closest to the Absolute, bears a name that must be rehabilitated: "Communism", or "the infinity of equality", whose historically most convincing work, although once again the victim of a cover-up by the established order, is marked by the name of Mao-Tsé-toung. The first step towards equality is the abolition of private property, starting with the means of production. The inevitable success of communism will enable us to live according to the Truths finally acquired by mankind in the four fields of Truth : politics, science, art and love. This will be "real life", open to all, happiness on Earth. It's mathematical. The axiomatic theory of sets teaches us this - the theory that, since Cantor and throughout the twentieth century, has established the hierarchy of numerical infinities. It's mathematical, because being is nothing other than pure multiplicity, and this pure multiplicity is also generic : it is equipped with a logic, a "transcendental", which is "the operative set that makes sense of the plus or minus of identities and differences in a given world". Ontology, then, is the theory of the multiple, the theory of sets with their generic extensions that reach the greatest possible numerical infinities, the ultimate infinities. Truths, which are at once singular - because they are distinct from one another - universal - because they are true always and everywhere - and absolute - because they identify themselves as true, through the index that emerges from the works without any differential reference to anything else, by the simple effect of their real presence - present themselves to us as the ultimate extension of this theory, the intimate yet impossible approach to the set that doesn't exist, the set of all sets - named V, for Void and for Vérités. Since being is the pure multiple, since every world is born of the pure*

*multiple and its transcendental and generic logic, the hierarchy of infinities as established, by successive leaps, in numericity is analogically transposed - from numeric value to ethical values - to all our infinities, to all our Ideas, to all our truths, be they political, scientific, artistic or amorous. What appears to be true of the great digital infinities, subject to their unprovable existence, entails the Truth in the future anterior - let's take the risk! - of the political Idea of equality between all men : Communism.*

My overall commentary on this work, which I will now go into in more detail, can be summed up as follows :

*Religious is excluded from the domains of truth listed by Badiou. Yet it is the only domain that can justify his notions of work and index. Badiou reduces the religious to religion, whereas religion is only a consequence. Yet this consequence, theology, is purely imaginary, unconstructible, as are Badiou's immanent Truths. But - is this the exception to the rule ? - Badiou sees it as an operator of finitude. Badiou is insensitive to the index of Truth - witness, for example, Kierkegaard's work, which is in no way theological - that emerges from works motivated by pure religious concern, a concern that deserves, more than others, to be qualified as infinite - it is perhaps the only infinite ! It's political concern that takes the place of religious concern, and obscures it : there is a possible happiness for everyone on Earth, accessible through politics. To the works - possibly artistic, like Brueghel's painting The Fall of Icarus - motivated by political concern, he associates a Truth whose name is "Equality" or "Communism". In a simplified but accurate and precise form, the Badiouian a priori can be written as follows : only the purely imaginary leads to Truths, apart from theology. The temporal is oppressive, confining us to finitude ; the imaginary is*

*emancipating, leading us to salvation. The hierarchy of numerical infinities, which can be established without risk in axiomatic set theory - the imaginary is controlled here by mathematicians, who always measure the logical consequences of their hypotheses of existence with the utmost rigor, in particular that of "inaccessible cardinals" - is high-risk - possibly suicidal - when transposed analogically, naively, by means of revolutions, into the politics of finite human sets, which takes place in time, in finite human time, at the most concrete level of our lives. Naive, because what Badiou discovers, after all this very romantic work, more poetic than mathematical, is ultimately just this : the physical law of large numbers - truths are those of the most numerous, the densest, the most active. Ultimately, the Truth index of a work is measured by the size of the Subject group that remains faithful to it - this numerical value, even extended to the whole of humanity, is not infinite. Badiou lacks the knowledge of what Being is - the multiple is only one characteristic of beings. He lacks the knowledge of what truth is - it is not a set of productions resulting from a generic procedure. For Badiou, Being is beings. And for Badiou, in beings, what takes place, starting with the pure multiple, is purely imaginary. For him, in beings, the imaginary is at war with the temporal as regards truths. In the purely imaginary epic he presents, time - our ordinary time, the one we all feel, the one that results from physical movement and its regularity, the one that takes us from childhood to old age, the one that arouses in us pure religious feeling - is passed over in silence, as it is, but with good mathematical reason, in the axiomatic theory of sets. If, for us, the imaginary is based on what is shown in time, then time according to Badiou, defined as the epoch in progress, as History, is based on what is shown in our imaginary, on our Ideas, in particular on the Ideas that emerge, singular, in the*

*minds of great men : scientists, poets, artists, lovers, politicians.*

*Now, the imaginary is a production based on the temporal, a production which can, in turn, modify the temporal, but which can also drift into fantasy, utopia and pathology.*

*Beings result from the withdrawal of Being by logic - time and imagination.*

*Yet truth - its definition - is only and necessarily our power of sight : our power to see what is shown, a power that is first and foremost, in and through childhood, the same for all of us.*

*And yet, in the course of his life, man is given access to the truth of being - to another power of view, to another way of looking at the world, a metaphysical or religious way, as Spinoza, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and even, before them, Badiou's first teacher, Plato, put it. This accession is the event, the birth, the unique singular event of a life, the unique motif of works in Badiou's sense, the event that leads to "dying to the world" and gives freedom and eternity.*

You're probably wondering how a body of work that runs to almost 2000 pages can be validly summarized in less than two pages. Well, Badiou doesn't do short. He wants to write big books, and he writes them ! Digressions and repetitions abound. To justify his theses, he references, quotes and comments at length on numerous writers, philosophers, mathematicians, poets, scientists, painters and musicians. He even comments on his own theatrical works. He gives us a complete lecture on axiomatic set theory and, above all, on its most recent, most complex generic extensions - even though he knows full well that his readers, most of whom are untrained, won't be able to follow him - as if the possibility of happiness on Earth were proven by these abstract demonstrations. In short, Badiou's culture is vast and diverse, and he shares it with us. Many of these cultural digressions are interesting,

sometimes crunchy, and breathe life into a work that could quickly become off-putting. Badiou writes well, clearly, and reveals, in addition to all his other talents, a talent for storytelling. But of course, that's not the point, and we mustn't get caught up in it. The question is : are these Truths he's talking about really ours, the ones that count for us, the ones that show us the essentials of what there is to see ?

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