

History without history

Frank Ruda, *For Badiou: Idealism without Idealism*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston IL, 2015. xxiv + 200 pp., £32.50 pb., 978 0 8101 3097 5.

As anyone familiar with Alain Badiou's oeuvre knows, a central tenet of his system is that there are no such things as 'philosophical events', 'philosophical truths' or 'philosophical subjects'. Philosophy testifies to events, truths and subjects – it retroactively declares and defends their existence – but it does not produce them (this is the exclusive domain of philosophy's 'extra-philosophical' conditions: love, science, art and politics). The ironic thing about Frank Ruda's *For Badiou: Idealism without Idealism* – a resolutely philosophical book, it is 'with and for philosophy' – is that, whilst seeking not to violate Badiou's own axiomatic difference between philosophy and its conditions, it mimics the formal structure of Badiou's desired relation between an event, truth and subject in its account of Badiou himself. Whether this is intentional or not is unclear, but for Ruda the name 'Badiou' undeniably functions as a philosophical event that has pierced our contemporary situation. This event has bestowed a body of philosophical knowledge which, despite not possessing the privileged status of a truth (it cannot, in so far as knowledge is for Badiou absolutely separate from truth), is presented as eternal and exceptional as the truths whence it came. And this knowledge demands fidelity on the part of its philosophical subject bearers.

Apart from his final call to question Badiou's decision to abandon Hegel, Ruda is militant in his fidelity to Badiou. There is barely a modicum of what one might identify as 'critique' in these pages (incredibly, Ruda states that 'any true pupil of a master can only be faithful to him or her by utterly betraying him or her at one point'). For all this, the breadth of Ruda's engagement with Badiou is impressive. This is a beautifully synthetic book, in many regards an exemplar of a close textual reading of a philosopher and his interlocutors (in this case Plato, Descartes, Hegel, Marx and Žižek). Its methodology reframes and extends that of Freud: the tripartite technique of 'remembering, repeating, and working through' is creatively doubled, yielding six chapters that offer concise but rigorous explications of, among other things, Badiou's identification of mathematics (set theory) with ontology (his identification of being with 'the void'), his account of different types of negation

(Ruda insists that '[his] whole oeuvre can be read as a working through of dialectics'), his reconstruction of the finite/infinite relation and his well-known rendition of the 'communist idea'. However, the principal issue that underlies this book – the overriding framework through which Badiou's system is presented – is in fact quite conventional: the well-trodden distinction between idealism and materialism. Ruda's response is to insert this distinction into materialism itself, and thereby to transcode it into Badiou's distinction, in *Logics of Worlds*, between 'democratic materialism' and 'materialist dialectics'. Yet the impulse behind this move (one, to be sure, that Badiou does not make) is not to jettison idealism (this would affirm a self-sufficient materialism), but to *renew* it, albeit by 'subtracting' (sublating) it from the idealism/materialism distinction. This is Ruda's dialectical manoeuvre, one that stems from the conviction that contemporary materialism 'is not materialist enough', that it is precisely 'the empty remainder, the empty place left by idealism ... which makes materialism properly materialist'. What Badiou's work provides access to is an 'idealism without idealism'; a '*renaissance of idealism*' that promises – and this is the real provocation – to make Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach relevant to the twenty-first century.

Following Badiou, 'democratic materialism' is for Ruda the contemporary and thus historical result of the 'death of idealism' (which is itself the historical result of Cantorian set theory). The scope of this concept, in *Logics of Worlds* and *For Badiou* alike, is expansive, so much so that it is at times entirely unspecified, reducing its critical purchase to a negative backdrop against which the rebirth of materialism – materialist dialectics – is imagined. Broadly speaking, it can be grasped as 'a materialism without idea, a materialism without idealism' whose basic axiom is 'there are only bodies and languages' (occasionally supplemented with 'there are only individuals and communities'). In this regard (resonating with the late Heidegger), democratic materialism is 'a contemporary form of nihilism [that] implies a reduction of human being to its own animal sub-structure', which is to say that its 'hegemony' reduces

human life to the level of finite individual bodies satisfying their needs through particular languages and cultural forms ‘translatable and exchangeable’. In Marx’s terms, this is the alienation of the sociality of human need. It should come as little surprise that democratic materialism is for Ruda *the* contemporary form of ideology, whose political-economic basis is what Badiou calls ‘parliamentary-capitalism’. In the terms of philosophy’s conditions, to be a democratic materialist (one senses that this is the vast majority of humankind today) means: you are scientifically *naive* (1, 2, 3, etc. are nothing but finite natural numbers); you are politically *indecisive* (you ‘choose without choosing’, because you foreclose the ‘impossible possibility’ of events, rendering your conception of freedom ‘pure and simple indifference’); your love is largely *carnal* (you ‘love sex in which one is allowed to freely consume the other, to express one’s desires in the most direct manner’, but ‘feel threatened by love’); and you are artistically *poor* (one thinks of Max Tomba’s ‘advertising is our contemporary poetry, speaking directly to the most intimate of our desires’).

In so far as it naturalizes the given, democratic materialism ‘forcefully forgets, denies, represses, and obviates the very existence of dialectics and thereby consequently enforces an *amnesia of the idea*’. This is the crux of Ruda’s critique of democratic materialism: it violates the indissociable unity of materialism and dialectics (significantly, Sartre’s systematic examination of this in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is nowhere to be found); hence it resists ‘*the very conception of an*

idea’; that is, it only overcame idealism in the first place because it disposed of the ‘materialist kernel of idealism itself’ (and thus the idealist kernel of materialism itself). In short, it is easy to see how ‘democratic materialism’ functions as a ready-made antithesis to the groundbreaking construction of a new materialism, a properly contemporary materialism (‘idealism without idealism’). In place of ‘the predominance of a very specific, reactionary, and obscurantist interpretation of the two’ (‘there are only bodies and languages’), we are invited to think a ‘dialectics of the exception’ wherein ‘the proper two is only graspable from the position of a three’ (‘there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths’, or ‘yes, *there are* only individuals and communities, except that *there are* subjects’). As opposed to the democratic materialist regime of the possible (a ‘stable ... statist regime that although it constantly seems to change, never truly changes’), materialist dialectics offers ‘something that appears to be unthinkable and impossible ... a *materialism of the impossible*’. If democratic materialism is ideology, materialist dialectics is ‘ideology critique’. And whereas democratic materialism feeds on ‘the saturation of the communist hypothesis’ within politics, such that its condemnation of communism ‘is a condemnation of thought *tout court* and hence also of philosophy’, materialist dialectics summons a philosophy that remembers ‘the necessarily impossible, the impossibly necessary’ and so true political action. (Badiouian) materialism is the communist idea.



Importantly, and unlike his presentation of democratic materialism, Ruda builds the concept of materialist dialectics through a detailed analysis of Badiou's chosen philosophical partners. As the thinker of the idea par excellence, whose writings exemplify the unity between the idea and dialectics – and thus the fact that *'the very nature of the idea is exceptional'* – Plato illuminates the real materialist task of philosophy: 'meta-critical anamnesis'. By 're-actualizing not only what has been forgotten but also ... the very means with which this anamnesis operates', philosophy is armed with the capacity to project onto the future and repeat the past in one and the same moment. A primary target of such anamnesis is unavoidably Marx, which means remembering and repeating his complex relation to Hegel and hence the idea of 'true' (universal) action. Faithful to Badiou, Ruda declares that true action 'upholds the permanence of classicism', which is to say that it 'is the concrete articulation of a *constantly perpetuated classicism* within a world'. True action, in other words, re-actualizes the 'determinate affirmation' (determinate negation) within dialectics: a political decision that corresponds to the classical logic of negation, the exclusive 'yes or no' (as opposed to the 'paraconsistent temptation' of 'yes and no at the same time'). This is the non-dialectical dimension of dialectics, its evental dimension. Materialist dialectics is thus 'a *dialectics of dialectics and non-dialectics*': it is fidelity to the contingent event 'as that which is not deducible from any dialectic whatsoever' but at the same time 'is what it will have been only through the dialectical unfolding.' An event cannot be substantialized, or 'there is the dialectical and there will have been the non-dialectical prior to the dialectical but only accessible after its emergence.' The influence of Žižek is clear: *For Badiou* matches *Less than Nothing* in its commitment to the logic of retroactivity.

Ruda also looks to Badiou's reading of Descartes to advance his materialism, a Descartes who shows that, despite our finitude, *'we can think that which we cannot think ... we can conceive of that which is but does not exist.'* Descartes' philosophy is a model for thinking the impossible possibility of the emergence of truths. It demonstrates, first, that truths are eternal, not because they have existed since time immemorial, but because they have been *created* (they are 'linked to ... absolute contingency'); and, second, that truths are exceptional – the Cartesian two is not originally internal to the domain of the 'there is' (it is at first not mind and body), but is rather this domain (thinking and extended substance alike) *and*

the domain of truths (which, like events, have no substance). In this sense, Cartesian dualism is exceptional, and at the heart of materialist dialectics. The difference between Descartes and Badiou lies in their conceptions of the subject: whilst the former locates the creation of truths in God's will – the 'absolute contingency of a free creative will', in Sartre's words – the latter sees the subject as 'a fragmentary agent of the creation of truths', a finite subject that is a *consequence* of the event but also that through which its truths are made. In Badiou, subject *processes* are the agents of truth *procedures* that 'always ... [take] place in a singular and historically specific situation'. The difference, it would thus seem, between Descartes and Badiou is *history*. If 'the event creates the God on which it will have relied', Badiou subtracts God from the creation of eternal truths and thereby dissociates himself (and presumably materialist dialectics) from any religious connotations.

This is important, because it constitutes a potential rebuttal to accusations of the mystical and therefore anti-historical character of Badiou's philosophy (see, specifically, the reviews of *Being and Event* by Jean-Jacques Lecercle in *RP* 93 and Peter Osborne in *RP* 142). Indeed, a feature of *For Badiou*, one that comes out most forcefully in Ruda's account of Badiou's critique of Hegel, is the historicity already generated by Badiou's system and theoretically enriched by Ruda's concept of materialist dialectics (in particular, 'true multiplicity ... for Badiou is the prerequisite to truly account for different historical situations and transformations occurring in them'). Yet for all its invocations of Badiou's historical bearings, *For Badiou* reproduces – in fact it exacerbates – what is truly an anti-historical philosophy. To put this another way, Badiou's philosophy, and with it *For Badiou*, is resolutely *historicist*. It systematically conflates 'historical specificity' with historical thinking, which above all proceeds from its association of ontology not with history but with set theory (which may have a history but, to paraphrase Marx, 'naturally does not know history'). In this regard, pure multiplicity can only account for historical situations and transformations *because* 'the true primacy of the two contains the *impossibility of totalization*'. Whether it is acknowledged or not, there can be no thought of 'history' absent the concept of totalization (Ruda operates with what Sartre would identify as the 'vulgar' concept of totality, one that forgets, denies, represses and obviates the *practical* identity between totalization and dialectics). Pure multiplicity, in other words, is historicism run amok.

This dovetails with the assertion, as earlier mentioned, that materialist dialectics (qua ‘idealism without idealism’) provides the means for a new reading of Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, a reading that would, contra democratic materialism, affirm ‘the existence of a (common) world before addressing the question of how to change it’. Behind this priority given to affirmation over transformation is an opposing vision, between Ruda and Marx, of the relationship between materialism, philosophy and the world. Whilst Ruda’s materialism seeks a normative affirmation of the world, whereby philosophy is ‘occupied with that which is not ... with exceptions to what there is’, Marx’s materialism dictates – to invoke the well-known maxim from his doctoral thesis – that philosophy’s worldly realization is at once its loss. This difference brings to centre stage the other ironic thing about *For Badiou*: it presents itself within the terms of a thesis that is a critique of the self-sufficiency of philosophy. The point here is not that Ruda misunderstands Marx, but that Badiou’s philosophy is a self-sufficient philosophy; that its four conditions do not mitigate but in fact secure this self-sufficiency (his philosophy, after all, ‘designates’ its own conditions). This does not only cast doubt on the notion that Ruda’s materialism fosters a new reading of Marx’s eleventh thesis. It also suggests that this materialism – and with it Badiou’s philosophy – has more in common with analytic philosophy than either Ruda or Badiou would likely admit.

George Tomlinson

Mao for now

Jacques Rancière, *The Method of Equality: Interviews with Laurent Jeanpierre and Dork Zabunyan*, trans. Julie Rose, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2016. ix + 201 pp., £55 hb., £17.99 pb., 978 0 7456 8062 0 hb., 978 0 7456 8063 7 pb.

As the preface of this book acknowledges, there is now no shortage of interviews with Jacques Rancière. Not only is the Internet bulging with them, but just three years before this recent book-length interview came out in French, many were collected into a volume running to almost 700 pages (an English translation is expected in 2017), while another short book of interviews appeared last year. If readers of Rancière don’t seem to tire of hearing what their author has to say about his work, it is partly due to the nature of his monographs, which rarely state

their aims and principles directly, and which can often best be characterized as ‘performative’.

Arguably, Rancière’s thought moves in the present tense, constructing the principles it follows in synchrony with the encounters with its objects. These principles are then named and defined only retrospectively, often following engagement with some of his more demanding readers: ‘All of a sudden, they ask you to explain your thinking by taking it out of its direct relationship with what it’s trying to think, with what it’s exerted on.’ Rancière states that he never intended to develop a theory of politics or a theory of art. If such theories exist, he says, they have emerged as a consequence of such retrospective engagements, following invitations from different readers.

It is true that one needs to look beyond these ‘theories’ in order to get to the core of Rancière’s thought, and the virtue of this collection is that it aims to do precisely this. Aptly named (by the interviewee himself), it focuses on the methodological principles underlying Rancière’s thought in its different subject areas (history, historiography, political theory, aesthetics, literature, cinema). Thus, Rancière’s main concepts appear less as ground-laying than as recapitulations of these principles. A central goal of the book, as Jeanpierre and Zabunyan state, is to address the danger, often present in the discussions of Rancière’s work, that the more fundamental principles disappear behind the routine use of his technical terms.

The book is divided into four parts according to a loose classification of the different scopes of Rancière’s work. It begins with an overview of the development of Rancière’s position in its biographical context (‘Geneses’), moving in the second part to question permanent currents running through the various fields of his work (‘Lines’); the third part turns to potential critical points, or internal and external limits, of Rancière’s thought (‘Thresholds’), and the last part considers the ways in which Rancière’s thought engages with the present, in the theoretical and historical senses (‘Present tenses’).

Rancière’s ‘break with Althusser’ has become a misleading cliché in the secondary literature; in the foreword of this collection Jeanpierre and Zabunyan specify that this rupture was a ‘political and methodological’ one. However, the emphasis on a break risks overlooking the elements from Althusser that substantially contributed to Rancière’s methodology. Rancière claims, for example, to have ‘been more faithful ... than Althusser was himself’ to the latter’s theory of multiple temporalities, and several