Review: Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, [2011] 2012). 120 pages.

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In the wake of the Arab Spring, Alain Badiou's *The Rebirth of History: Times of Riots and Uprisings* ([2011] 2012) offers an analysis of riots, how they relate to political transformation, and what they portend about the current state of leftist resistance to the neoliberal world order. As the consequences of the 2011 uprising in Egypt continue to unfold in 2013, with millions of Egyptians once again occupying Tahrir Square, Badiou's book provides an approach that allows us to discern and hold onto the original promise of the event; however, it also acknowledges the undeveloped state of movement organizations. He posits a framework of historical periodization that is based on the presence or absence of an Idea, and in so doing conceptualizes a shared condition that has more to do with ideological and organizational questions than with economic or technological determinism. Badiou argues that the riots we are enacting signal the return of History with a capital H. This History is a categorically emancipatory one that is defined by ongoing struggles for equality and justice. Badiou's standard for genuine political transformation in the current context involves a clear break with what he refers to as capitalo-parliamentarianism, the dominant political and economic form of Western democracies. His ultimate horizon is an egalitarian politics of dialectical communism. While he offers tools with which to measure the political efficacy of riots, the more significant question he raises is the exact nature of the organization that could serve emancipatory political struggle today.

It would be difficult to deny Badiou's general claim that we are in fact living in a time of riots. Beyond the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Libya and Syria that are collectively referred to as the Arab Spring, we are witnessing mass protests and occupations of squares across Europe, North America and the wider world. The Spanish *indignados* and the Greek anti-austerity movements were followed by the occupation of the state legislature in Wisconsin in defense of public sector unions, and the emergence of the Occupy Wall Street movement. Students have also been mobilizing in large numbers: in 2010 thousands marched in the UK against the tripling of tuition fees, in Italy a movement sprang up against cuts to education, and in Quebec in 2012 a proposed increase in tuition fees led to a six-month long strike known as the Maple Spring. First Nations in Canada became Idle No More in response to a bill aimed at undermining the environment and their treaty rights. In a number of cases what may appear to be issues of limited interest have become triggers for massive demonstrations and broader demands. Turkey's Taksim Square, the Brasilian transit-fee protests, and Indian anti-rape marches are but the latest in an ever-growing list. How do we make sense of such an intense collective energy that is emerging at sites across the globe and in response to seemingly disparate issues and conditions? Beyond the empirical fact that riots are currently taking place with all of their particular causes and contingencies is it possible to find in them the threads of a common experience defining our age? Badiou's book would seem to suggest that the intensity of these current uprisings can be attributed to a growing recognition that an alternative to the preceding forty years of neoliberal global capitalism is possible, though as yet the nature of this alternative remains undefined within social movements.

Riots have always occurred. In order to defend the proposition that these current riots indicate something more than a negative reaction to poor social and economic conditions, and so carry the weight of a rebirth of History, Badiou's first task is to offer us a conceptual framework for categorizing riots by how they may or may not relate to politics. He differentiates between immediate, historical, and latent riots. *Immediate* riots are typically a reaction to a violent action on the part of the state, such as police brutality or murder. These riots are destructive and nihilistic, spread through contagion, and take place in the very neighborhoods of the rioters. These riots are not political because they lack the powerful subjective trajectory that is produced by the affirmation of an Idea (rather than simply the negation of present conditions).[1] For Badiou, the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt exemplify *historical* riots that are occurring today. Significant traits of an historical riot include the construction of an enduring central site, such as was seen in Tahrir Square, rather than a limited localization in a neighborhood. They also spread through a qualitative extension rather than simple imitation. This means that all different types of people take part in the riot beyond the figure of the rebellious young man who plays the primary role in immediate riots. While the real multiplicity of the people who join the riot is extended, the symbolic unity of a single demand emerges.[2] Badiou's final category of *latent* riot applies to massive movements in the Western world whose riotous elements remain repressed or contained by the electoral system or union and party leaders, yet nevertheless include dimensions of action and subjectivity that could potentially transform the movement into a historical riot.[3] Badiou gives

[1] Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London and New York: Verso, 2012), 22-25.

[2] *Ibid.*, 33-35.

[3] *Ibid.*, 27-32.

as an example the strikes against pension reform in France and we could certainly include Occupy Wall Street and the Maple Spring in this category.

Badiou's conceptualization of different kinds of riots provides clarity to what are often confusing collective outbursts. His criteria for historical riots in particular construct a bridge of thought that allows us to move past the reactive violence of the immediate riot and the sociological explanations and moral condemnation that it invites and moves us towards an analysis of what transforms a nihilistic destructive act into a political act. Badiou's concepts of contraction, intensification, and localization are productive in this regard. It is tempting to simply stop here and utilize these categories to determine which riots count as historical and hence "political" and strive to cultivate and support them. However, this would be to forget that for Badiou, even the historical riot is only pre-political and does not yet constitute a new form of politics. The historical riot is simply the beginning of the beginning and it is in the remainder of the book that Badiou's most significant arguments about politics and organization can be found.

The larger claim that Badiou puts forward is that the occurrence of the recent historical riots in the Arab world signal a rebirth of History that is characteristic of what he calls an "intervallic period." An intervallic period is a time where the revolutionary idea of the preceding period is dormant and an open, shared, and universally practicable figure of emancipation is wanting.[4] This indicates a reawakening of History because the desire for an alternative social organization is evident and yet nothing has been decided about its specific character. This openness to possibility seems to be a necessary stage that precedes the affirmation of a new figure of politics. It becomes clear that for Badiou the Idea, or a generic concept of emancipation, carries significant

[4] *Ibid.*, 39.

weight in political transformation. It is the lack of an Idea that results in the painful quality of an intervallic period, full of disarray, unfulfilled hopes, and bursts of energy that are quickly dissipated for lack of a guiding principle that could form the basis of an organization. The Egyptian situation bears witness to the still pre-political nature of the historical riot, insofar as the initial uprising has not yet gone far enough in positing an Idea beyond democracy and therefore did not lead to an organization that could replace the current state.

Badiou wrote the *Rebirth of History* in 2011 in the aftermath of the Egyptian "revolution." In spite of the general optimism of this time and Badiou's insistence on the importance of this event in relation to a reawakening of political possibilities, he remains firm in his analysis of the Egyptian uprising as an historical riot and not an actual revolution. The common perception that these events do constitute a revolution is supported by the fact that Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down, that elections took place, and a new constitution was installed signaling a concrete political transformation. In the aftermath of Tahrir Square there is indeed a general sense that something significant has changed that seems to indicate that politics in the Arab world will never be quite the same. But do these organizational changes at the level of the state really reflect the desired transformation expressed by the initial occupation of Tahrir Square? After the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took control away from the Mubarak regime, repression against protesters continued. While the desires expressed by the people in Tahrir Square were broadly egalitarian, the most organized political group and the one to be successfully elected, the Muslim Brotherhood, combines its political principles with particular religious priorities. The first democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi, was

also criticized for issuing a decree that granted him immunity from the law and prevented challenges to his decisions. Two years after the initial uprising millions of Egyptians took to the streets to declare that this new government is not what they wanted. The danger that the initial uprising might end in something other than genuine political transformation was obvious to the core vanguard of the riot from early on. This awareness of the precarious nature of the Idea present in the event was reflected in the controversy surrounding the too-quick move to the new constitution and elections that did not allow the rioters enough time to organize a meaningful force that could influence the state to come.

Admittedly, those who declare the event to be a revolution may do so in order to protect the real possibility that was opened up by the historical riot, and not to claim that the existing reality lives up to these original desires. What makes this differentiation between revolution and riot more than a simple semantic dispute is the implication that follows for today's social movements. In calling the recent uprisings historical riots, Badiou is arguing that these movements have not yet fully confronted the problems of organization inherited from earlier political sequences. This issue will be discussed further below, but first, one must acknowledge what has changed in the Egyptian situation.

In spite of the uninspiring outcome of the riot at the level of the state there is something different in the aftermath of the 2011 uprising. What is different is that people who did not previously count in the situation have entered the stage of history. In the event of the riot the Egyptian people attained a "maximal intensity of existence" to an extent that could not be ignored.[5] The coming to visibility of an "inexistent" constitutes a shift in the

[5] *Ibid.*, 56.

logic of appearance and therefore signals the opening of a possibility. In this case, the possibility of something other than what Badiou calls "Western inclusion." But in itself a shift in the logic of appearance does not transform the actual state of the situation that the inexistent find themselves in. As Badiou writes: "the poor have not become rich; people who were unarmed are not now armed [...] Basically, nothing has changed."[6] People's lives have not improved and the 2013 uprising was in part in response to worsening standards of living. Without an affirmative Idea and an organization to give the riotous dimensions of contraction, intensification, and localization some duration, no new figure of politics can emerge that would break with the established order.

In some other texts, Badiou has designated periods of historical time that are structured by major political events and the truth procedures they initiated. The events in question are moments in which a new truth was introduced into the world that compelled militants of this truth to reorganize their lives and struggles in accordance with its axioms. Badiou uses truth procedure to refer to these ongoing effects of the event over time. For instance in the *Communist Hypothesis* he speaks of three eras:[7] the first begins with the French Revolution and its aftermath, and is exemplified by the Paris Commune; the second begins with Leninism and the October revolution and comes to an end in the aftermath of the Chinese Cultural Revolution and May '68; and the third begins in the 70s and covers the era of neoliberal reaction up to the present. Alternately, in *The Rebirth of History* Badiou substitutes the significant end points of the second sequence for the Iranian Revolution and the *Solidarność* movement in Poland, both of which he characterizes as

[6] *Ibid.*, 56.

[7] Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcocan (London and New York: Verso, 2010).

conservative movements that represent the exhaustion of an Idea rather than a rebirth.[8] While the present intervallic period bears similarity to the nineteenth century, insofar as we have seen the reestablishment of a laissez-faire style capitalism through neoliberal reforms as well as the scattering and weakening of leftist resistance, Badiou does not understand this as a regression so much as the reopening of the possibility of new possibilities. The current moment may be witness to the invention of new forms of politics that resemble, neither those of the nineteenth century, nor the solutions to these problems posited in the twentieth century.

The central problem left to us by the preceding political sequence is the problem of organization and the state. The anti-statist dimension of Badiou's thought lends some support to anarchist approaches to social change. And yet, as the preceding discussion of Egypt makes clear, while populist, egalitarian spontaneity is central to the historical riot, this initial spontaneity must be organized if it is to confront the gap between the internal democracy of movements and the banal system of state decision and authority. The multitudinous nature of the generic crowd does not carry within itself the answers to the problems of history.

Perhaps the most constructive critique that Badiou offers to today's political militants can be found in his assertion of the paradoxical continuity between the egalitarian democracy internal to movements and the popular dictatorship they impose externally.[9] Unlike the naive egalitarianism of resistant subjectivities, Badiou does not flinch from confronting the immensity of this contradiction, although at the same time he does not think that it is a problem that philosophy can or should solve. Badiou describes the dictatorial

[8] Badiou, *Rebirth*, 36-38.
[9] *Ibid.*, 59.

dimension of popular democracy as the self-legitimating authority of truth or rationality. He addresses the complex relation between democracy, philosophy and politics in another recent book, *Philosophy for Militants*.[10] Here, Badiou argues that while democracy is a condition of philosophy insofar as philosophy is addressed to all and all may partake in it, this initial presumption of an equality of intelligences does not extend to an equality of opinions.[11] Philosophy is oriented by its own rational postulates towards the unity and universality of truth. He contrasts the egalitarian principle of justice to the principle of individual liberty and comes out in favour of the former.[12] He goes further to describe justice as the contingent alliance between virtue and terror.[13] It is precisely the spectre of terror that this idea of truth contains that tends to make postmodern subjectivities uneasy. But the escape hatch of liberal pluralism and difference, what Badiou refers to as the regime of opinion, is only an escape from our own responsibility and it lands us exactly where we started: the deadening empiricism of a world in which the only things that are possible are those that already exist. Popular democracy is therefore not about the freedom of opinion and pluralistic relativism, a freedom that in fact forestalls change, but rather about making a fundamental choice premised on an axiom of equality and justice and then following the consequences.

The dictatorial authority of popular truth is something not often acknowledged by rioters themselves even as they enact it and live it. The perceived need among militants to distance their politics from those of the

[10] Alain Badiou, *Philosophy for Militants*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

[11] *Ibid.*, 27.

[12] *Ibid.*, 29.

[13] *Ibid.*, 33.

state communism of the second sequence, something that Badiou acknowledges, has led to the strong embrace of democracy, participation, and horizontalism as central ideas of emancipation. And yet, this ostensible rejection may operate as a form of repression if a pure politics of egalitarian democracy is idealized without recognizing the power and authority unleashed by the unassailable, categorical nature of political truth. If popular movements do not acknowledge this force that they carry they will be unable to wield it with any kind of effectiveness. Drawing on Badiou's critique, I would argue that the two dangers that may result from the popular democratic ideology within movements are either the evacuation of a political truth by the reduction of democracy to voting, elections, and numerical majorities—a result that does not break with the capitalo-parliamentarism of the present—or that a belief in spontaneity and immanence will prevent a durable and capable organization from developing that could transpose a new political figure beyond the state. The recourse to democratic assemblies functions well as a way to organize resistance but as Badiou asserts, it is only when the militants of a truth are capable of immediately seizing state machinery that a new figure of politics emerges.[14]

It is at this point in Badiou's thought that we come up against a central ambiguity. How can we conceive of an organizational form that is capable of seizing state machinery and that departs from the forms of politics dominant during the second sequence? Can a new organization emerge that is capable of seizing and occupying the state without the hierarchy of armies and the force of arms? Once occupied, can this organization maintain fidelity to the truth that produced it? Badiou suggest that the party form, at least in its traditional expression within twentieth-century socialist countries, has been exhausted of

[14] Badiou, *Rebirth*, 46.

its potential, while also warning of the limited durability of spontaneous popular democracy and its (current) incapacity vis-à-vis the operation of state functions. He insists on organization as the fundamental concept necessary for moving forward through this impasse, yet, the precise nature of organization remains unspecified. We can understand the decision to leave the contradiction between popular democracy and party form open as a dialectical approach to the problem and the refusal of a false choice. However, to simply dismiss the party form outright, as many anti-capitalist activists today do, does not resolve the problem of state power. Badiou's abstract "organization" holds this contradiction open, allowing a gap for something other to be determined by the truth procedure itself rather than by political philosophy. While the old party form cannot be mobilized, the problem it names remains within view in his analysis through the acknowledgment of the popular dictatorship that inheres in radical organization. In a more pragmatic register, his reiteration of organization amounts to an insistence that the work of political militants is not exhausted in the exuberant intensity of the riot but must endure through its difficult aftermath. The precise forms of organization that this will entail are to be invented in the process of struggle. It is important to recognize though that this struggle is in turn determined by the particular Idea or truth that emerges in an event. Badiou gives us reason to question whether democracy, at least in its unqualified form, is an Idea that is adequate to sustain anti-capitalist movements, even in contexts where basic liberal freedoms cannot be taken for granted.

Many of the riots mentioned in the opening paragraphs could be considered historical riots and attest to an era of new possibilities. But they do not in themselves contain the answers to questions of organization. In this regard, Badiou may leave some readers unsatisfied. One cannot help but desire

for the blanks to be filled in, for Badiou to sketch out what kind of organization would be capable of sustaining a new truth. Yet he prudently leaves this to be determined by the political truth procedure itself, not by the (anti)philosopher. He leaves us with a set of concrete criteria without which any new movement would be lacking in truth: it must offer a generic, universal figure of emancipation and reject the reduction of politics to identitarian objects. And he is also very clear about what it is not: what is resolutely not an option is the everyday brutality of capitalism, state, and the counting of votes. The space of liberal rational discussion, the "democratic" enumeration and management of opinions is so heavily circumscribed by the power and influence of capital and the state that it does not contain an iota of emancipation or truth.

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