



DOCUMENT

UFD0021  Nick Land

Sore Losers

In his response to Alain Badiou's analysis of the terrorist attacks in Paris, Nick Land detects a residue of 'Frenchness' in Badiou's universalism, reconfigures the battlefield of the future, and plays devil's advocate for globalised capitalism

[L]et's admit it: Globalization does not automatically benefit France. [...] Globalization develops according to principles that correspond neither to French tradition nor to French culture. These principles include the ultraliberal market economy, mistrust of the state, individualism removed from the republican tradition, the inevitable reinforcement of the universal and 'indispensable' role of the United States, common law, the English language, Anglo-Saxon norms, and Protestant—more than Catholic—concepts.

—Hubert Védrine, February 9, 2002¹

To be French is to understand—with peculiar lucidity—what it is to have been defeated by modernity. The world's first modern nation, enthralled beyond all others by the call of the universal, has been cropped back to a nexus of untaken paths, over the course of two centuries. If Hubert Védrine says this more clearly than Alain Badiou, Badiou says it nevertheless. *Our Wound is Not So Recent*. The title already says almost everything. To anticipate: '...our wound comes from the historical defeat of communism.'

Compared to this primary, chronic and, by now, *essential* misfortune, occasional disasters are mere accidents. The recent massacre in Paris by soldiers of Jihad provides an unusually dramatic (or 'particularly spectacular') instance. Yet, despite its colorful, richly affective character, the disturbance of state security represented by the slaughter of a few score Parisians is a minor affair, when compared to the

conquest of modernity itself—and thus the world—by a far more ominous adversary. Whatever philosophical dignity is to be found in reflection upon the November 13 incident lies in its cognitive adoption as a relay, leading back to the main story, 'the triumph of globalised capitalism'.

It is understandable, therefore, that the elegance of Badiou's presentation is unable to fully conceal its structural irritability. 'We' have been *distracted*, which is how adults understand 'terror'. It is a distraction of 'thought' that has occurred here, Badiou insists, and thus an annoyance, in multiple senses, including that of simple condescension. As befits a member of the socio-cultural elite, Badiou's response takes the form of a thoughtful meta-irritation—an irritability directed at irritation as such. This is an anti-empirical reflex and therefore, in some definite way, 'French'—but we will get to that soon enough. Those scores of dead youngsters strewn across Paris demand some affective acknowledgment, which is undignified (and annoying). Far more significantly, the atrocity upsets people. It is—precisely as intended by the perpetrators, and also in the most neutral sense of the word—exciting. The public response it elicits is not only philosophically useless, but positively deleterious to the work of the universal. 'So, to counter these risks, I think that we must manage to think what has happened.'

1. <<http://www.theglobalist.com/france-and-globalization/>>.

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I think so, too. We have a duty to philosophy—which is to say, to our only credible model of nobility—to be *cold*. Emotional spasms in response to blood spatter would be unbecoming. It would also be an integral contribution to the achievement of ‘fascist’ terror. Worst of all, it distracts. Terror excites identity, by concentrating it, and packaging it in a false simplicity. Badiou is not concerned to disguise the fact that, for the European Left, in particular, ‘identity’ is the true terror.

There are, however, other distractions—for ‘us’. When Badiou proclaims that ‘*Our* wound is not so recent’, we are compelled to ask: How far does this collective pronoun extend? A response to this question could be prolonged without definite limit. Everything we might want to say ultimately folds into it, ‘identity’ most obviously. Whatever meaning ‘communism’ could have belongs here, as ‘we’ reach outwards to the periphery of the universal, and thus (conceivably) to the end of philosophy. ‘Frenchness’ is, in some complex way, involved by it, among other social sets of lesser and greater obscurity. This ‘we’ is the whole, even as it is hidden in the margin. It is also strategically non-negotiable. (Nobody asks ‘who?’—as Badiou knows they will not.) Smuggled into grammar, it says everything of ultimate consequence in advance of any possible rejoinder, framing subsequent controversy in its terms. A sovereign or transcendental antagonism—settled securely beyond discussion—thus announces itself, in a whisper.

In comparable fashion, then, we can only propose another ‘us’ outside it. As already promised, the detail—if only a little—will soon follow. For the moment, it need only be noted that ‘their’ identity cannot be assumed to be ‘ours’, any more than we share their problems, their successes, or their defeats. The pronoun is scrambled, torn apart. We are not ‘wounded’ by what hurts them, unless accidentally, and by the failure of their collective project least of all. Whatever malice might appear in

these words strikes us as sheer retaliation. This is only to say that Badiou’s ‘we’ was already a project of mobilization and a declaration of war, if only as a recollection, and a gesture of defiance. The haze that surrounds ‘us’ is the fog of war. No one can be sincerely shocked by that. (We are not children.) Our conflict is not so recent.

The stakes, on both sides, are absolute. There is—most probably—nothing we would not do, were it still necessary, in order to prevail against each other

‘It must be seen that the objective victory of globalized capitalism is a destructive, aggressive practice,’ Badiou asserts. We can only shrug, since of course, *for you* (collectively), that is simply true. Its successes are your defeats, and reciprocally. No one is being educated by any of this. We have, not so very long ago, menaced each other with thermo-nuclear warheads, and burnt down states still more recently. The stakes, on both sides, are absolute. There is—most probably—*nothing* we would not do, were it still necessary, in order to prevail against each other. ‘Victory’, ‘defeat’—these are Badiou’s words, even if—for no reason at all—*war* is not, at first, although it soon will be.

Let us explicate, then, that which Badiou leaves still partially implicit. *We do not care about Islam*. No one does—at least no one we care about, but only ‘fascists’. For the industrialized world, it is never more than an annoyance, and more typically a complex opportunity to be exploited, a weapon to be directed at those whose antagonism is respected. Having failed at modernity with a comprehensiveness that approaches the comedic, it has been many centuries since Islam has had any kind of serious claim upon history to lose—so ‘a whole section of the global population is counted for nothing’, inevitably. We can parasitize Badiou’s shallowly-buried contempt without qualification: ‘it’s fascization that islamizes, not Islam that fascizes’. We will decide upon the way to categorize their refusal of our categorizations. Your coldness is tested by this joke.

It is not that religion is quite nothing, of course, even for Badiou, at his most French. Not *originally*, in any

case. 'Religion can perfectly well act as an identitarian sauce for all of this, precisely in so far as it is a suitably anti-Western referent. But as we have seen, in the final analysis, the origin of these youths doesn't matter much, their spiritual or religious origin, as they say, and so on.' (It 'is counted for nothing'.) 'What counts is the choice they have made about their frustration' (we decide). 'And they will rally to the mixture of corruption and sacrificial and criminal heroism because of the subjectivity that is theirs, not because of their Islamic conviction. What is more, we have been able to see that, in most cases, islamization is terminal rather than inaugural.' Nihilistic individuals, seduced into 'fascism', articulating their motivations in words that count for nothing, pathetic existentialist communists with false consciousness, malicious punks...if there are some further resources of contempt that might be added to this analysis, they will not be easy to find. Which is not at all to suggest that we encounter anything problematic here, or in need of rectification.

It could easily have been some other faith that provided this 'terminus', we are expected to accept (unless the concession to 'a suitably anti-Western referent' is the clue to a more persuasive—and decorously unspoken—claim). All right, we accept. For the sake of moving forward, we accept it, despite the extraordinary deformation of historical evidence required to do so. Let us pretend that our Jihadi 'fascists' are only randomly differentiated from Buddhists or Confucians, in order to proceed to the identities that more immediately concern us.

Those dead Parisian youngsters cannot be 'counted for nothing' quite so easily. They would have certainly done some capitalism, even despite themselves, and also – being young and French—quite probably some communism, in addition, so they matter to 'us', at least a little. The young Jihadi 'fascists' who slaughtered them, in contrast—with nothing to make but a distraction—are nothing at all, to either of us. That saddens Badiou, rhetorically, and tactically. 'Their own life did not count. And since their own lives did not count, the lives of others meant nothing to them either.' *Look what globalized capitalism did to them.* Perhaps we should turn our attention to this far more serious, historically-productive monstrosity, before we upset people—gratuitously—with our unfathomable and entirely mutual indifference.

Let's recapitulate. We have a contemporary world structure dominated by the triumph of globalised capitalism. We have a strategic weakening of states, and even an ongoing process of the capitalist withering away of states. And thirdly, we have new practices of imperialism that tolerate, and even encourage in certain circumstances, the butchering and the annihilation of states.

The main story of recent times has been 'the liberation of liberalism'—the freeing of capitalism—Badiou insists. (His preferred identity lies in insisting this.)

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This *Thing*—the Great Foe—is not devoid of identity, however embarrassing it may be to explicitly acknowledge that fact (i.e. its factuality as such). To succumb to excitement about the empiricity of 'Capitalist globalization', in its scandalous singularity, is to thrill to its vast annoyance, rather than its universal disaster. Yet it is, *as everyone clearly recognizes*, an Anglophone global affliction that disturbs 'us', and an Anglophone ideological negligence that has 'counted for nothing' those without any productive part to play in its expansion. The *major* enemy is Anglophone, Anglo-Saxon, Anglo-American—'Anglo-Jewish', it will inevitably be said, if not by Badiou then by innumerable others, including especially the Islamic 'fascists' whose sensitivities refuse to be dulled on the point. It is, in any case, the positive ethnic constituency primarily identified with 'the liberation of liberalism' when this is acknowledged with coarse realism. No one gets to see how *peculiar* this thing is from nowhere. Its critics, we can confidently—if indelicately—speculate, have been concretely offended. They have been 'wounded'—and not *only* so very recently.

Of course, there could be nothing more *gauche* than to articulate ideological criticism in the voice of national resentment. From the perspective of philosophy, to speak in the name of *any* positive

identity—even one far more fashionable than the nation and its associated ethnic categories—is a simple disgrace. Selected identities might be exalted from a distance, in approximate proportion to their transgressive or victimological status, but every elite intellectual understands profoundly—if often only implicitly—that ontic definition is *dirt*.

Badiou is fastidious, therefore, in avoiding all temptation to self-identification in less than universal terms. His ‘discursive position’ depends upon his identity as a proud communist, who merely happens to be French. There is a cost to be paid for this, in honesty—or realism—first of all. A necrotic collectivist utopianism does not constitute a plausible site of enunciation, and no one believes that it does. It is perhaps for this reason that Badiou refrains from quite closing the door onto a certain nuanced ‘patriotism’, even if his catastrophist narrative demands that it is held ajar only in a mode of nostalgia (and one that is not wholly devoid of bitterness). What France was, as a revolutionary power, is still affirmed, in a tone at once tragic and philosophical, drawing the requisite quantum of detachment from both:

France, what is singular about France—because if there are French values, we must ask what is singular about them—is the revolutionary tradition. Republican first of all, from the ‘89 revolution. And then socialist, anarchosyndicalist, communist, and finally leftist, all of this between 1789 and, let’s say, 1976. [...] But all that’s over. It’s over. France can no longer be represented today in any credible way as the privileged site of a revolutionary tradition. Rather, it is characterised by a singular collection of identitarian intellectuals.

The surrender of France to the identitarian vice is but part of the more comprehensive defeat. Yet the dramatic quality of Badiou’s stance here should not blind us to what it evades. The French accent in what he has to say—both before and after this passage—extends far beyond his lament for the nation’s withered revolutionary vocation. The ethnic identity that speaks in his words encompasses, among many other things, a specific mode of universal aspiration, a secular faith ‘freed’—contemptuously—of religious trappings, and a firm confidence in the moral dignity of the State. There has only been one ‘revolution’ of the kind he inherits as a model, and it was

French. It identified reason with revolutionary innovation—to a degree commonly found amusing beyond the Gallic cultural sphere, despite its menacing incarnation in an armed re-origination of the state, from first principles. Naturally, these ‘first principles’ were already a dismissal of the old religion, through their very originality, and also an exaltation of philosophy—as smelted in the flames of insurrection. They were the monsters bred from Descartes’s methodically exacerbated, artificial nightmare, released by a passage through zero (radical doubt), in which organic tradition was immolated upon the altar of the universal. They would—for instance—have decimalized time and geometry, and struggled earnestly to do so, repeatedly, without even a moment of pious reservation or residual doubt...but they failed. Modern history, from a particular but illuminating angle has been this failure, this defeat. *Our Wound is Not So Recent*.

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French identity, radically conceived, corresponds to a failed national project. Is it not, *in fact*, the supreme example of collective defeat in the modern period, and thus—concretely—of humiliation by capital? It is the way the ‘alternative’ dies: locally, and unpersuasively, without dialectical engagement, dropping—neglected—into dilapidation. It can be inserted into a limited, yet not inconsiderable, series of identities making vehement claim to universality without provision of any effective criterion through which to establish it. When frustrated by the indifference of the outside, such objective pretensions tend to turn ‘fascist’ in exactly the sense Badiou employs. Their claims are shown—*demonstrably*—to be non-compelling beyond their own shrinking domain. They are ignored, so they ‘act up’. A certain violent madness is easily spawned. Yet it is rarely more than a distraction.

What we are suffering from is the absence, at the global scale, of a politics that would be detached

entirely from the interiority of capitalism. It is the absence on the global scale of this politics that means that a young fascist appears, is created. It is not the young fascist, banditry, and religion, that create the absence of a politics of emancipation able to construct its own vision and to define its own practices. It is the absence of this politics that creates the possibility of fascism, of banditry, and of religious hallucinations.

This is Badiou's analysis. The pin-pricks so far—and the far greater sufferings to come—result from an ethno-political defeat, in a long conflict still recalled by its stubborn survivors as a global drama of the Universal. It is a defeat that they imagine—or at least, still claim to imagine—might one day be undone. Who would deprive them of their old songs, and strange flags, and wounded dreams?

The 'liberation of liberalism' has scarcely begun

Spite, or triumphalism, are identitarian confusions, extravagances, and also simply errors that we cannot afford. Our war is far less comprehensively won than theirs is lost. The adversaries that matter—*real fascists*—have controlled the commanding heights of our societies since the New Deal. The techno-economic dispersion of power remains radically incomplete. Sino-capitalism—momentarily trembling—has yet to re-make the world. The 'liberation of liberalism' has scarcely begun. None of this is a concern for Badiou, however, or for the Islamists. It belongs to another story, and—for this is the ultimate, septicly enflamed wound—as it runs forwards, ever faster, it is not remotely theirs.
