

PHILOSOPHER OF THE YEAR

When a young Karl Marx first encountered the writing of the German idealist philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, sometime before 1837, he was electrified. Today, reading Hegel's incredibly abstract prose, it may be difficult for us to understand, but Marx found in Hegel a system of ideas that pictured reality as a field subject to dynamic historical change, rather than as static and unchanging. It was the intellectual confidence Marx absorbed from Hegel's ideas that gave him the prepossession to build his own revolutionary program – even as he was to modify Hegel's picture to make it apply to the concrete world of his day.

On April 1, 2005, a large and diverse crowd filled an art gallery in downtown Manhattan to see the French philosopher Alain Badiou speak. The turnout was impressive – only a week earlier, the gallery, Deitch Projects, had been uncertain enough about interest that they had considered rescheduling the event in favor of a Pamela Anderson photo shoot. But the public came until the standing-room-only crowd packed against the back walls. Held in a popular, non-scholarly environment, this feat is even more striking given that Badiou is a thinker whose major work, *Being and Event*, has not even been translated into English yet and that, moreover, is heavily mathematical in character.

What accounts for Badiou's sudden popularity? 2005 saw the beginning of a Badiou industry, with academic monographs beginning to appear about the French thinker. He also earned a certain amount of caché in North America through the classes he has taught in English alongside figures like Slavoj Žižek and Giorgio Agamben at Switzerland's experimental European Graduate School. Most importantly, however, is the situation into which he steps: Like the world of ideas that the young Marx faced, philosophy has for the last 20 years in North America has been incredibly abstract. While it has produced sophisticated critiques of language and power, it has also left two generations of students with the feeling that it is impossible to do anything progressive without it being absorbed by the unchanging logic of the System.

Against this, Alain Badiou has marshaled all the resources of theoretical mathematics, Continental philosophy and a strong analysis of historical

struggles to defend the notion that progressive and radical change can happen: "Despite its rarity," he states in his *Theoretical Writings*, "politics – and hence democracy – has existed, exists, and will exist."

To take just one example, postmodern thought has been obsessed by the figure of the cultural other. However, the abstract, absolute character of the postmodern idea of the other has insured that any attempt to reach out will always be viewed as just another form of domination. Badiou has brought a withering philosophical criticism to bear on the notion that cultural difference can be thought of in terms of overarching generalities about metaphysics, arguing instead that the social field that structures otherness is a matter of specific "situations," organized around certain concrete, tendentious exceptions, with political "truth" being a matter of bringing these exceptions to light. Thus, while postmodern philosophy dead ends into the abstract, politically correct call for "respect" of difference, Badiou's philosophy yields a demonstration of the potential that a fight for immigrant rights can have.

This framework – rooting out false generalities and arguing for the logic of specific situations – has allowed Badiou to do everything from strategize about the ways that art can combat the power of the contemporary communications media, to mount a much-needed defense of science in the face of postmodern arguments that see all systematic thought as equally problematic (a relativism of which the religious right has recently been only too happy to take advantage).

To be sure, the fact that Badiou has fought these battles on academic terrain makes them vulnerable to being sucked up into empty scholarly debates, and the task for his admirers remains, as it was for Marx with Hegel, the understanding of Badiou's theories in the terms of today's specific struggles.

But those who have read Badiou's work will always be able to defeat any intellectual pessimism as to the possibility of real action. Alain Badiou has definitively shifted the center of argument: The question is not whether or not change is possible, but where it will happen.

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