

**enduring philosophy's
perpetual *kampfplatz*:
frank ruda's *for badiou*:
idealism without idealism
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In a note inserted at the beginning of the English translation of *For Marx*, Althusser remarks that if the emphasis throughout his text falls on the question of Marxist philosophy, then this is in order to assess its reality and right to exist, as well as the problem of its lateness, insofar as its theoretical form had not been fully elaborated.¹ This note bears the date October 1967, which places it just prior to the beginning of the “Philosophy Course for Scientists” at the École Normale Supérieure Rue d’Ulm, which was to run from November 1967 to May 1968. Although the full program for the course was never to be completed—other, decidedly non-theoretical distractions took over around that time—the concluding lectures were delivered by Alain Badiou.²

The lectures were later published as *The Concept of Model* in 1969, and were themselves appended with a note, signed “Théorie, December 1968,” *Théorie* being the name of the imprint of Éditions Maspero under Althusser’s direction. This note, which indicates an overlapping between Althusser and Badiou that perhaps dissipates over time, cautions that the work’s focus on questions of science is a very limited one, providing an early warning against what Althusser would label theoreticism in his self-critiques.

The two notes are useful complements to one another, and provide a helpful heuristic for a consideration of Badiou’s project as a specifically post-Althusserian

philosophy. While Badiou's work has become increasingly well-known to Anglophone readers after the translation of *Being and Event* was first published in 2006, an often practically necessary split between situational, interventionist texts (almost always political in some sense) and abstract philosophical tomes persists in obstructing access to Badiou's theoretical work in general. It is certainly true that many commentators, as well as Badiou himself, mobilize aspects of more imposing works in order to render them more succinct, subtracting them from a dense edifice involving idiosyncratic readings of the history of philosophy, Zermelo-Fraenkel set theory, and category theory. Among several examples, we can name Badiou's own *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1 and 2), of which the decision to write "for" philosophy again hearkens us back to Badiou's post-Althusserian context.

Frank Ruda signals and forcefully claims this context in his recent *For Badiou: Idealism Without Idealism*. Althusser's decision to write "for" Marx in *For Marx* is predicated upon a wager of developing theoretical resources that are not simply derived from Marx's thought (which would make them "of" Marx), but rather form a crucial extension, supplementing his works by means of concepts and arguments which may in some opaque sense already be contained within them.³ Ruda picks up on this legacy in his introduction, making clear from the outset that his book "for Badiou" is one that attempts to pick up on what he characterizes as Badiou's gesture of the self-affirmation of philosophy; pushing this Badiouian phrase a step further, Ruda states that his aim is to delineate how the self-affirmation of philosophy which thereby affirms the conditions of philosophy in art, science, politics, and love (Badiou's four domains of truth), works and is defensible as a synthetic characterization of Badiou's overall project. (8-9)

Ruda admirably carries out his explanation of this phrase with concision. Although *For Badiou* is not written with beginners to Badiou's philosophy in mind, one of Ruda's chief accomplishments is the way in which he draws from a vast array of Badiou's texts and manages to provide a succinct interpretation of Badiou's contribution to philosophy in just over one hundred and fifty pages. Ruda accomplishes this with the help of two different tripartite structures. First, he adopts as a series of watchwords the terms introduced by Freud to describe psychoanalytic technique in a 1914 text: remembering, repeating, and working through. He then uses this structure to interrogate Badiou's recourse to three proper names in the history of philosophy: Plato, Descartes, and Hegel. Ruda does not claim that Badiou's references to these figures simply need to be consulted for hermeneutical details, but instead that they can be productively mined by means

of the tripartite structure he adopts from Freud in order to identify *the meaning of philosophy* in Badiou as a particular way of remembering Plato, repeating Descartes, and in the last instance, working through Hegel.

Before turning to some of these details, two further remarks on the conjunction of the two prefatory notes with which we began are helpful. First, one way of reformulating the warning against theoreticism in an affirmative way, already present in Althusser's own note before the English translation of *For Marx*, is to understand philosophical work as an intervention in a definite conjuncture. Ruda picks up on this idea, emphasizing its importance for Badiou's philosophical practice and using it to identify the concrete point of departure for Badiou's philosophy in the difference between Badiou's well-known denouncement of "democratic materialism" (there are only bodies and languages) in favor of his version of materialist dialectics (there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths) from the opening pages of *Logics of Worlds*. Ruda's most fundamental claim is that these polemical axioms go to the heart of Badiou's philosophical production, and that the distinction between these two different forms of materialism should be defended. It is this differentiation that gives the book its subtitle: democratic materialism is a materialism without the idea, whereas materialist dialectics is a materialism with a renewed understanding of the idea, which Ruda formulates as the most crucial concept necessary to understand Badiou's philosophy, namely an "idealism without idealism." (12-13)

A second and less immediately apparent echo of these notes lies in Ruda's helpful cognitive map of different readings of Marx's 11th thesis on Feuerbach. We might agree with the idea that an interventionist current is present throughout Badiou's work, even at its most speculative (the general idea of philosophy as conditioned by truths which are outside of it, meaning that philosophy is not self-sufficient, requires claims about specific historical conjunctures in order to be sensible, as in the most obvious case of the certain developments within mathematics that lead to Badiou's meta-ontology in *Being and Event*). However, it does not take a very close reader of Badiou to point out, as many have done, the relative paucity of engagements with Marx throughout his writings. It is in this sense that we can understand Ruda's cognitive map regarding how philosophy conceives change as a particular way to inhabit the question of Marxist philosophy, which is otherwise not clearly articulated in Badiou's own work. This cognitive map provides at least some minimalist criteria for understanding Badiou's project even further as a certain deviant Althusserian one (both an interventionist and Marxist philosophy), and since Ruda lends the map significant importance in establishing

the groundwork on which he is “for” Badiou, it is worth tarrying with it at some length.

Ruda argues for at least three paradigmatic ways of reading Marx’s 11th thesis, which he qualifies are not always sharply distinguishable from one another yet represent historically influential aspects of how the thesis has been read. (15) He labels these three paradigms the transformative reading, the reversing reading, and the exaggerating reading. The transformative reading first and foremost holds that interpretation itself is simply a form of contemplation *ante rem*, which must be replaced by both practice as well as a new philosophy of practice *in rem* that is opposed to philosophies of interpretation. The transformative reading does not abolish philosophy, but rather argues that philosophy can be fulfilled in the future by changing what change means from abstract interpretation to practical intervention, and becoming that change. In opposition to this, Ruda labels the reversing reading one that rejects the transformative reading’s insistence on the absence of change in order to claim that there is an “already present actuality of ongoing change.” (16) Since the world is constantly changing, adequate interpretations that can keep pace with this change are needed. Like the transformative reading, the reversing reading suggests that philosophy itself must change, but it disagrees with the form it should take. Instead of becoming practice, philosophy should change in relation to its proper mode of interpretation—it should change interpretations in order to keep up with the truth of change.

Finally, Ruda adds to these first two an exaggerating reading of the 11th thesis, which he claims agrees once more that philosophy must change. Unlike the transformative but in agreement with the reversing reading, however, the exaggerating reading continues to locate philosophy’s proper mode in interpretation. Where it differs from both is through its focus on what the world itself means wherein both philosophy and change take place. Through exaggeration, this reading claims to shift the perspective on the world so much that in carrying out its interpretation, the world is changed because the exaggerating reading breaks with the hegemonic ideological coordinates of the present. In short, “the present world is changed by overemphasizing a forgotten past that lies at its ground.” (18)

While Ruda is cautious in attaching proper names to these readings because they are formal reconstructions at some remove from careful textual analysis, he does list in passing Bloch, Adorno, and Žižek as at times representative of the transformative, reversing, and exaggerating readings, respectively. He further claims that passages within Badiou’s work can be attributed to each of these three

readings, which is why he supplements them with a fourth, materialist dialectical reading that he claims characterizes Badiou's conception of philosophy. First, Badiou's position agrees with the others that philosophy does need to change, but claims that it does so by becoming an active gesture, irreducible to the terms of interpretation. Second, the act of this philosophy relates to the world (or, as we will come to find out, its absence). Third, this act is neither critical nor determined by the change already taking place in the world, and relatedly, fourth, the exaggerating reading can be taken up in a very specific way by returning to idealism, "a seemingly obsolete moment from the past," in order to avoid the hegemonic ideological coordinates at work in democratic materialism. (19)

Ruda impressively reconstructs these aspects of a Badiouian materialist dialectical reading of the 11th thesis from a number of different texts, and supplements them at length with the two tripartite structures mentioned above. Although this hypothetical reconstruction is unlikely to assuage anyone skeptical of Badiou's (relative) non-engagement with Marx, especially the critique of political economy,⁴ it does serve as a very useful summation of Ruda's account of Badiou's specific practice of philosophy. Ruda reiterates these four aspects a bit later in terms that will allow us to analyze his overall proposal of understanding Badiou's philosophy as one that offers both a *true and contemporary materialist position* (12-13). These four aspects are:

- (1) a *philosophical act*, that is, an inscription of a hierarchical distinction;
- (2) an element of *concrete analysis of the concrete contemporary situations* and hegemonic ideological coordinates that relate philosophy to the present world;
- (3) a *determinate affirmation* that cannot be deduced from the given ideological coordinates; and
- (4) an *active form of doing nothing*, a historically specific way of doing no-thing. (25)

I will not dwell at length on the details of how Ruda develops each of these claims from within Badiou's work, but it is worth noting that the italicized terms form perhaps the essential vocabulary Ruda constructs in order to explain what he means by *idealism without idealism*, a term that, in some sense, sums up these aspects.

In order to briefly recapitulate, the first feature assimilates what we outlined above as the interventionist capacity of philosophy: it proceeds by drawing lines of demarcation. I will return to this point and the second one about concrete analysis in my concluding remarks, as the third and fourth characteristics strike

at the heart of the novelty in Ruda's proposal of an idealism without idealism.⁵ We might approach the fourth aspect as Ruda's precise description of the *idealism* without idealism he seeks to delineate. Ruda also characterizes this fourth aspect as a counter-affirmation, which dovetails well with his development of the possibility for a determinate affirmation.

The wager involved in inscribing this counter-affirmation into any contemporary materialist position is that there is something necessary within idealism in order for the other three features of Badiou's philosophy to work. Ruda identifies what is necessary within previous idealism, unsurprisingly, with its "materialist kernel," and provides two answers, the dialectic and an idea. (35) Affirming both parts of the materialist kernel is what makes up the "counter-affirmation" against democratic materialism, which denies this kernel according to Ruda (and Badiou). This is most fundamentally why Ruda goes to some length to examine three traditionally idealist thinkers who are important to Badiou's work.

To the counter-affirmation of beginning with the materialist kernel of idealism, Ruda adds what he calls a determinate affirmation. This affirmation also fleshes out the *idealism* without idealism, to continue parsing this concept in the way we have above. It is most clearly articulated in terms of how it reclaims a certain primacy of dualism, or "the Two" in Badiouian parlance, from a reading of Descartes. For our purposes, what is essential here is that according this primacy helps to demonstrate the way all presentation relies upon something unrepresentable within it. In other words, what initially makes up "the Two" is on the one hand, something presented—a "there is"—and on the other hand, an exception to this "there is." As Ruda summarizes, "Materialist dialectics is thus a dialectics of the exception which introduces a split into the materialist 'there is.' ... Only this split 'there is' is truly materialist. There need to be two 'there is's.'" (102) With this somewhat awkward formulation, we are able to move back into a more proper or true materialism, according to Ruda.

Yet it is with this type of transition that some of the limitations of this argument make themselves clear. First, although it should be reiterated that Ruda displays a mastery of different arguments in various contexts which span across Badiou's writings, it is sometimes difficult to grasp how different components in the book hang together overall. Some of this is due to an occasional Žižekian-style rhetoric where distinctions are recalled or presented as counterfactuals or hypothetical questions in such a way that the uncharitable reader would simply find a premise that is repeated rather than an argument being developed. To be sure, this rhetoric

only occasionally appears, and it is perhaps a certain side-effect to Ruda's critical treatment of Žižek as a sparring partner, consistently demarcating the Badiouian position from a Žižekian one.

One example of how this gestural rhetoric affects the overall argument in the book is in its treatment of Hegel. Certain gestures and ruptures here are perhaps unavoidable, because Badiou himself is much more ambivalent towards Hegel than he is towards Plato and Descartes. Ruda deserves credit for taking on the challenge of pushing a confrontation between variegated speculative arguments internal to Hegel and Badiou's systems in addition to the synthetic recapitulation of Badiou's (materialist) contribution to philosophy that marks the overall argument of *For Badiou*. Moreover, he adds in a footnote to the final chapter that his remarks on Badiou and Hegel are preliminary first-passes at a research agenda for a book on Hegel's *Science of Logic* he is currently co-writing with Rebecca Comay. Yet the final section begins with a lengthy series of counterfactuals which allude to an element within Hegel's *Science of Logic* that is absent from Badiou's few brief, but technical (and clearly set forth by Ruda) comments on it. Then the section (and book) ends abruptly with the suggestion that to read Hegel after Badiou means that "everything changes—this will bring about a yet completely unknown Hegel." (150)

While it would be unfair to press too much on these concluding remarks, which do not detract from this excellent book's status as a decisive contribution to contemporary debates in materialist philosophy, this equivocal resolution to the status of Hegel within *For Badiou* helps to signal two further lines of critical inquiry which might be taken up in response to it. After all, *For Badiou* does not stake its claim as a comprehensive exposition of Badiou's thought, even though it does provide a rigorous and thorough entry-point. Instead, I read Ruda's most fundamental contribution to be the twin task of a speculative reconstruction of the specificity of Badiou's philosophy coupled with the marshaling of Badiou's thought as what enables one to conceive of a contemporary and true materialist position in philosophy. I have tried to explain the strengths of both of these aspects throughout the review, necessarily skipping over some substantial aspects of a book that for its concision does not sacrifice any acumen in dealing with a litany of complex problems in Badiou and materialist philosophy more generally.

At the risk, then, of parroting some critiques of a "stereotypic cliché-picture of Hegel," (133) which Ruda suggests that Badiou avoids, I will conclude here with two brief remarks, occasioned by the somewhat equivocal conclusion regarding

Hegel. I do not want to raise any problems of a totalizing, Hegelian boogeyman, especially as the constructive, post-Badiouian work on Hegel has yet to be done. Instead, I wish to point to Badiou's own critique of Hegel in order to raise two points about Ruda's global presentation of Badiou's contribution to contemporary materialist philosophy, one directly related to it and another tangentially so. First, recalling our characterization of the third and fourth aspects in Ruda's reconstructed, Badiouian materialist dialectical reading of Marx's 11th thesis (determinate affirmation and counter-affirmation), we noted that these twin-affirmations represented the core to Ruda's *idealism without idealism*. Yet, the overall contribution of these aspects to Ruda's project are only legible insofar as they are absorbed into his account of contemporary materialism. In this sense, they must be contextualized alongside the first two aspects: a philosophical act and a concrete analysis of concrete situations. With the third and fourth aspects, Ruda explains Badiou's recourse to certain idealist tropes as what enables him to think through the exception to democratic materialism. To perhaps remember, repeat, and work through something we introduced at the outset of the review, we can recall how Ruda follows Badiou in distinguishing between two forms of contemporary materialism: democratic materialism (there are only bodies and languages) and materialist dialectics (there are only bodies and languages, except that there are truths). In one sense, as Ruda himself notes at the outset of the book, being able to identify and differentiate between two different forms of materialism is "the main idea" driving the book. (12) Here a further point of clarification regarding Ruda's argument is necessary, which both refines the scope of the materialist field to which the book finally contributes and raises a significant methodological point that is left unanswered. Following Badiou's appropriation of Cantor's proof for the inexistence of a set of all sets, Ruda claims that "the old ideological battle, to echo Louis Althusser, between idealism and materialism that will always have determined and always will determine philosophy reaches a new phase." (12)

According to Ruda, the new phase of this battle means that it now takes place within materialism; previous idealist positions are not considered as viable. The decision to restrict the scope in this sense is not surprising for a book dedicated to both the work of Badiou and setting an agenda for contemporary materialism. Ruda clarifies that in differentiating between democratic materialism and materialist dialectics, he does not want to suggest that there is a "bad" idealist materialism in comparison to a "good" materialist materialism. Instead, and in continuity with his technique elsewhere in the book, he aims to understand the inscription of the battle between idealism and materialism within these two distinct materialisms

in a different and more dialectical way. He does this by inserting a reversal at the point of this battle's inscription into materialism: whether it is "good" vs. "bad," it is materialist dialectics which is able to reclaim the materialist kernel of previous idealism and not democratic materialism, which remains idly repeating a materialist "there is" composed only of bodies and languages. Hence it is this premise which completes the picture we outlined earlier, showing the way in which Ruda attempts to think through an idealism *without idealism*.

However, what remains unclear in this re-inscription of Althusser's distinction and Ruda's reversal of it within democratic materialism and materialist dialectics is in what precise sense these appellations should be understood. More pointedly: in Althusser, the distinction between idealism and materialism is one of tendencies that traverse different philosophies, rather than positions or sets of positions which definitively cast a philosopher into one camp or the other. To be sure, in his treatment of specific idealist thinkers, Ruda is careful to emphasize the partisan readings that he and Badiou provide to them. Yet the repeated emphasis on stipulating a *true* materialism runs the risk of substantializing and homogenizing various positions under proper names. This applies as much, if not more, to the names of democratic materialism and materialist dialectics as it does to Plato, Descartes, and Hegel. While both Badiou and Ruda regard democratic materialism as a contemporary spontaneous philosophy, its exact status remains somewhat unclear, as it occasionally serves to mark the philosophical positions of those whose own words are otherwise absent.⁶ If we are to understand the positions taken within materialism today as more tendential, following Althusser, then we would remain at a certain distance from a narrative able to assimilate and continually reconstitute a "true" lineage; in other words, we would remain at a distance from a narrative that, while claiming to occupy a materialist position, bears a similarity to Hegel's own story about the history of philosophy. I do not think that Ruda ends up with quite this narrative, but some more details regarding the exact status of the explanatory function of democratic materialism and materialist dialectics would have been helpful. To rephrase the point in the form of a question inspired by the conceptual moves of *For Badiou*: would we be allowed to identify an exception or exceptions to the contemporary "there is" of democratic materialism and materialist dialectics as the two forms of contemporary materialism?

A second point follows directly from one of Badiou's critiques of Hegel that Ruda identifies in the final chapter of *For Badiou*. Simply put, it regards the necessity for materialism to claim its status as *contemporary* in addition to its authentic

or true character I have tried to gesture towards above. Ruda calls attention to Badiou's critique of Hegel's concept of history, recapitulated in the formula "time is the being-there of the concept." (143) He rightly points out that Badiou finds this position to entail the claim that history does not exist in any way except for the "unfolding of the one concept whose history is history." (143) In other words, there is only one true history of the unfolding of the concept as delineated by Hegel. Both Badiou, and Ruda following him, instead hold that history is made up of multiplicity (and since there is no One-All, in Badiouian parlance, there is no one true history). Yet Ruda does not draw out all of the consequences of this position. Contemporaneity does play a specific technical role in one of Ruda's central arguments regarding a Badiouian reading of the 11th thesis on Feuerbach, which we alluded to above. Namely, in situating the twin affirmations from the materialist core of idealism within the materialist act of a concrete analysis of concrete situations, Ruda seeks to lay claim a historically specific situation that is distanced from the ideological coordinates of the present. It is not clear to me that this historically specific and occasional contemporaneity maps onto a claim about the necessity for materialist philosophy to lay claim to contemporaneity as such.

Ruda approaches this point elsewhere in the book when he distances himself from what he labels "expressive dialectics," following a short recent lecture of Badiou's entitled "Politics: A Non-Expressive Dialectic" as well as Althusser in *Reading Capital*. And yet one crucial consequence in rejecting expressive dialectics is that the problem of contradiction can no longer be posed at one level to which it is possible to achieve contemporaneity in relation. Contemporaneity is at best a local and occasional operator, and not the watchword for materialism to try and capture. To switch registers somewhat abruptly, however, I do not mean for these critical reflections to call into question the status of Ruda's *For Badiou* as an exciting and worthwhile contribution to contemporary questions of materialism, here of course understood in a more mundane sense. While these few ambling remarks are intended as ways of deepening the sense in which Badiou is a post-Althusserian philosopher, in addition to the complications of his post-Platonic, post-Cartesian, and post-Hegelian attributes that Ruda remembers, repeats, and works through here, they may serve primarily as gestures to contemporary materialist philosophy in order to be "for" Althusser. For it is not only in consciously drawing lines of demarcation that lines of demarcation are in fact drawn, nor is it only in drawing out the consequences of such lines of demarcation that philosophy contains the contradictions of the conjuncture.

NOTES

1. Louis Althusser, “To My English Readers” *For Marx*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: Verso, 2005, 14. Althusser’s slightly later comment serves as a useful rejoinder in terms of the ongoing tasks of such elaboration: “Marxist theory can fall behind history, and even behind itself, if it ever thinks it has arrived.” See Louis Althusser, “Is it simple to be a Marxist in philosophy” *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists and Other Essays*. Trans. Grahame Locke. London: Verso, 1990, 230.
2. In fact, Badiou’s lectures were interrupted by the events of May. For a detailed and fascinating account of this lecture course and its significance, see Pierre Macherey, “Althusser and the Concept of the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists.” Trans. Robin Mackay. *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy* 6 (2009, 14-27).
3. Jason Read provides a useful discussion of the sometimes equivocal difference between “concepts of” and “concepts for” in the introduction to his recent book, to which I am indebted. See Jason Read, *The Politics of Transindividuality*. Leiden: Brill, 2016, 1-16.
4. Ruda does briefly note in passing that Badiou’s materialism is an addition to “simply continu[ing]” with Marxian political economy,” thereby leaving room for further work on this connection. (29) Admittedly, this problem is well beyond the specific focus of Ruda’s book, and would be impossible for him to do justice to in this context, but insofar as the book both lays claim to *any* contemporary materialist position and foregrounds Marxian motivations inherent to some of Badiou’s positions, it perhaps opens up this most tricky question regarding Badiou for a future treatment. For an excellent and recent examination of Badiou along these lines, see Gavin Walker, “On Marxism’s Field of Operation: Badiou and the Critique of Political Economy.” *Historical Materialism* 20:2 (2012, 39-74).
5. An additional concept which Ruda uses to summarize Badiou’s philosophy is what he labels “meta-critical anamnesis.” This concept operates within each of the aspects I have sketched here, recalling a critical, distinguishing operation within philosophy and addressing it to a historically specific situation and its ideology. (44-45) Crucially, the operation is meta-critical as opposed to critical because clarifies situations but “does not itself directly or immediately” intervene within them. (131) This helps distinguish the act of the materialist dialectical reading that Ruda sketches from the transformative reading, which posits a more direct intervention for philosophy.
6. While this problem remains only at an equivocal and unresolved level in the text of *For Badiou*, one very clear example of it can be seen in a footnote where Ruda wants to be cautious of his use of a politics “in distance from the state” to describe Badiou. He notes that a line of demarcation is necessary because such a slogan could seem to be just another version of “what Toni Negri (and others) refer to as ‘exodus.’” (184) Perhaps the fellow-traveler of Negri’s who has done the most to develop the concept of political exodus is Paolo Virno—here not even named in passing—who nonetheless has been a strong critic of so-called postmodernist positions for many years, the same types of positions which tend to be assimilated under the banner of democratic materialism. In bringing this up, my point is not merely to decry the oversight of Virno’s work on this point, but rather to use it as an example which calls for more specification regarding both the status and explanatory scope of a position such as democratic materialism.