

Nick Hewlett

Badiou, Balibar, Rancière

Re-thinking Emancipation

Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy



BADIOU, BALIBAR, RANCIÈRE

Continuum Studies in Continental Philosophy

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In memory of Enone Hewlett, 1920–2006

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Note on Translations

In the two chapters on Badiou and the chapter on Rancière, I have translated quotations from the original, French editions of their works, except where the original is in English, or where I have indicated otherwise. In the chapter on Balibar, I have quoted from English translations of his work, except where I have indicated that the translations are my own. Where I quote from or refer to an English translation, the date of the original (French) version of the work is indicated in square brackets.

Abbreviations

Full details of the following works are found in the bibliography.

Abbreviations for works by Alain Badiou

- AM *Abrégé de métapolitique* (Seuil, 1998).
B *Beckett: L'incrévable désir* (Hachette, 1995).
BF 'Beyond Formalisation' (interview with Peter Hallward in *Angelaki*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2003, pp. 111–36).
C1 *Circonstances, 1. Kosovo, 11 septembre, Chirac/Le Pen* (Léo Scheer, 2003).
C *Conditions* (Seuil, 1992).
DO *D'un Désastre obscur. Sur la fin de la vérité d'état* (l'Aube, 1998).
D *Gilles Deleuze: 'La clameur de l'être'* (Hachette, 1997).
E *L'Ethique: Essai sur la conscience du mal* (Hatier, 1993).
EB 'Entretien de Bruxelles' (in *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 526, mai 1990, pp. 1–26).
EE *L'Être et l'événement* (Seuil, 1988).
IT *Infinite Thought: Truth and the Return to Philosophy* (Continuum, 2003).
LM *Logiques des mondes. L'être et l'événement, 2* (Seuil, 2006).
MP *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Seuil, 1989).
PH 'Politics and Philosophy' (interview with Peter Hallward in *Angelaki*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1998, pp. 113–33).
PM *Petit manuel d'inesthétique* (Seuil, 1998).
PP *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Seuil, 1985).
S *Le Siècle* (Seuil, 2005).
SP *Saint-Paul. La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris, PUF, 1997).
TC *Théorie de la Contradiction* (Maspéro, 1975).
TS *Théorie du sujet* (Seuil, 1982).

Abbreviations for works by Jacques Rancière

- AB *Aux bords du politique* (Osiris, 1992).
- AL 'Althusser'. In Simon Critchley and William R. Schroeder (eds) *A Companion to Continental Philosophy* (Blackwell, 1998, pp. 530–36).
- CD *La Chair des mots. Politiques de l'écriture* (Galilée, 1998).
- CT *Chronique des temps consensuels* (La Fabrique, 2005).
- DW 'Dissenting Words. A Conversation with Jacques Rancière.' (*diacritics*, summer 2000).
- LA *La Leçon d'Althusser* (Gallimard, 1974).
- LH *La Haine de la démocratie* (Seuil, 2005).
- LP 'Jacques Rancière: Literature, Politics, Aesthetics: Approaches to Democratic Disagreement.' Interview with Jacques Rancière by Solange Guénoun and James H. Kavanagh (*SubStance*, no. 92, 2000, pp. 3–24).
- M *La Méésentente* (Galilée, 1995).
- MI *Le Maître ignorant. Cinq Leçons sur l'émancipation intellectuelle* (Fayard, 1987).
- NH *Les Noms de l'Histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir* (Seuil, 1992).
- PP *Le Philosophe et ses pauvres* (Fayard, 1983).
- SP *Les scènes du peuple. Les Révoltes logiques, 1975–1985* (Horlieu, 2003).
- TT 'Ten Theses on Politics', *Theory and Event* 5:3 (2001).

Abbreviations for works by Etienne Balibar

- DC *Droit de cité* (PUF, 2002).
- HW 'Gewalt', in *Das Historisch-Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus*, Das Argument Verlag, Berlin. Available online in French at http://ciepfc.rhapsodyk.net/article.php3?id_article=36 (accessed January 2006).
- IC 'The Infinite Contradiction', in *Yale French Studies* 88, 1995, pp. 142–64.
- LC *La Crainte des masses: politique et philosophie avant et après Marx* (Galilée, 1997).
- LG 'Lénine et Gandhi: une rencontre manquée?' Communication au Colloque MARX INTERNATIONAL IV, « Guerre

impériale, guerre sociale », Université de Paris X Nanterre, Séance plénière, 2 Octobre–1 novembre 2004; http://ciepfc.rhapsodyk.net/article.php3?id_article=36.

MCI *Masses, Classes, Ideas* (Routledge, 1994).

PM *The Philosophy of Marx* (Verso, 1995).

RNC *Race, Nation, Class. Ambiguous Identities* (Verso, 1991, with Immanuel Wallerstein).

SP *Spinoza and Politics* (Verso, 1998).

SS 'Sub species universitatis'. In *Topoi* no. 1–2, September 2006, pp. 3–16. Viewable at: http://ciepfc.rhapsodyk.net/article.php3?id_article=81.

WP *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (Princeton University Press, 2004).

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Chapter 1

Contexts and Parameters

Alain Badiou, Etienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière each work within the intellectual and political tradition which embraces the notion of human emancipation. Associated with political struggle, resistance, and freedom from oppression, the emancipatory paradigm is inspired by the philosophy of Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel and Marx. It famously found intellectual expression in the Enlightenment and its landmark political moments include the American Revolution in the second half of the eighteenth century and the French Revolution of 1789. In the twentieth century, emancipation was often associated with independence from colonial rule, the emancipation of women from male domination, and the emancipation of the working classes from capitalist exploitation. By adopting the view that freedom is closely linked with freedom from oppression, advocates of the emancipatory tradition set themselves apart from liberals, who tend to conceive of freedom as absence from interference.

Such an approach to ideas and politics became less influential in France from the mid-1970s onwards, having been highly prevalent for two hundred years. But Badiou, Balibar and Rancière have each vigorously resisted the trend towards the various types of liberal thought that have become so much more current in France, and each has made a significant contribution to the emancipatory tradition. Even superficial acquaintance with the work of these writers thus suggests that those who have rushed to write the obituaries of France's tendency to produce radical intellectuals may have been too categorical, too soon. Although I am by no means in full agreement with Badiou, Balibar or Rancière, I have chosen to examine their work in part precisely because they each place the collective and rebellious action of ordinary people at the very heart of their philosophical systems, whilst at the same time engaging with French and

other thought which has emerged since Sartre was the dominant force in European philosophy. They should not be seen as forming any kind of united philosophical school, for disagreements and differences between them are sometimes considerable, but their common and steadfast refusal to make concessions to a variety of more mainstream intellectual and political currents both sets them apart from numerous other thinkers and suggests treatment within the same book.

Each of these writers has adopted as a major aim to explore notions of equality, and the relationship between equality and emancipation. For Badiou, the very idea of politics is intimately related to equality and his philosophy includes an egalitarian presumption. His philosophical system is organized around the notion of the event, which is virtually synonymous with a broad concept of revolution, and as far as politics is concerned the event is often an actual political and social revolution in a traditional sense. For Balibar, his term 'equaliberty' is at the heart of his understanding of politics, meaning that there can be no freedom without equality, and vice versa. The notions of emancipation and transformation are central to his definition of what is political. For Rancière, a discussion of equality is so central to his thought that in a characteristically provocative way he argues that equality is a starting point for any definition of politics and not just a distant goal. Politics is intimately related to uprising and insurgency on the part of excluded groups and against the unjust status quo; a disruption of the normal order of things via a bold intervention by those who have no voice.

In the broadest of terms, the work of these three thinkers is influenced by Marxism, the ground from whence they all sprang in the early years of their intellectual and political development. However complex their intellectual discourses might be, and however unexpected some of their points of reference, they each still return frequently to a common idea that an intellectual position of any real significance must relate to an intervention in the material world in order to change that world in an egalitarian direction. Despite some highly novel, unorthodox and eclectic philosophical points of reference, each seeks to interpret the world from a position that starts with a belief in the need to pursue the logic of defending the interests of ordinary people. Although none are now likely to describe

themselves as Marxist, none are studiously post-Marxist either, in the sense that they might want to announce their passage from a stage where they were strongly influenced by Marx to one where they definitely are not.

The overarching question which I pose in order to evaluate and engage with the work of Badiou, Balibar and Rancière perhaps reflects my training as a historian and political analyst, rather than as a philosopher. It is: how can the powers of reflection be put to use for transforming and egalitarian ends at the beginning of the twenty-first century? The question of how to make thought relevant and useful to the organization of human societies is of course one which permeates all forms of political thought. John Locke, who divides knowledge and science into three categories, *fysikē*, *praktikē* and *semi-otikē*, defines *praktikē* as ‘the skill of rightly applying our own powers and actions, for the attainment of things good and useful’ (Locke 1989 [1690]: 461) But for each of these writers the more precise notion of *praxis* is appropriate. *Praxis* extends further the idea of *praktikē* and, in addition to applying the powers of the intellect to the material world, also includes as a major consideration the influence of the material world on thought. The result is a dialectical relationship between theory and practice. This approach is arguably central to each of Badiou, Balibar and Rancière’s own endeavours and I am thus to an extent assessing them by their own criteria, judging the successes and failures of their projects in terms which they themselves broadly work to: how useful is their work in terms of both understanding the contemporary world and changing it for the better, and how has the material world influenced their thought?

Certainly, many pages of this book are devoted to evaluating the internal logic of their thought, to comparing Badiou, Balibar and Rancière with each other and with other philosophers, or with thinkers in different domains. If one or other is similar to or remote from a particular intellectual tradition or thinker, or represents a radical break from a tradition or thinker, this is relevant and important. By the same token, I seek to trace the intellectual origins and development of these three writers. But if I examine their thought *qua* thought in this way, I also do so as a means, ultimately, to assessing their relevance to the material, and broadly speaking political, world with

a view to examining the possibility of applying their philosophy to the world around us.

The importance of Badiou, Balibar and Rancière's work is gradually being recognized more widely. In addition to their considerable originality and intellectual breadth, the sheer volume of output on the part of these thinkers helps explain why each is being taken increasingly seriously. Since the publication in 1988 of Badiou's major work, *L'Être et l'événement*, he has written more than twenty further books, together with numerous articles and interviews, ranging from abstract discussions to pamphlets and newspaper articles on contemporary politics, via comments on historical events. His most significant philosophical work since his first magnum opus is *Logique des mondes* (2006), which is intended as a sequel to and refinement of some of the major propositions contained in *L'Être et l'événement* and is indeed subtitled *L'Être et l'événement, 2*. Balibar has also published a great deal, ranging from a close reading of and re-interpretation of Spinoza, in *Spinoza and Politics* (1998 [1985]) to extended commentary on European citizenship and racism, for example in *We, the People of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship* (2004 [2001]), via essays containing innovative definitions of politics itself and of political violence, in, *inter alia*, *Masses, Classes, Ideas* (1994) and *Politics and the Other Scene* (2002). Rancière has likewise been prolific and has published over thirty books. He began his career with explorations of political thought and political economy, then spent many years working in labour and social history, before returning to political thought as well as writing widely on aesthetics. His most important work of political thought to date is *La Méésentente* (1995) but almost as important are his brief but extremely rich *Ten Theses on Politics* (2001).

In particular, the international renown of these writers is increasing. Each has been widely translated, especially (but not only) into English, as the References and Bibliography section of this book illustrates, and the rate of translation into English accelerated greatly in the first few years of the new century; all this of course has a dynamic of its own as non-French-speaking readers become interested in and in some cases politically committed to the works, following the logic of their enquiry. Indeed, it is probably true that, as with some of the major proponents of poststructuralism, the reception for the ideas of

these thinkers has been and will continue to be greater in Britain and the USA than in France itself. Taking the case of Alain Badiou, although he teaches at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris and attracts large audiences to his seminars and lectures, there has been, to date, only one major conference on his work in France, in 1999, in whose proceedings many contributors are from outside France (Ramond 2002). There have by contrast been a number of conferences on Badiou's work in Britain and the USA. Moreover, there are two general works on Badiou's philosophy in English (Barker 2002 and Hallward 2003) and only one in French (Tarby 2005a), and two collections of essays on Badiou in English (Hallward 2004 and Riera 2005) where they are absent in French. The same applies to special issues of journals.

A brief look at the careers of these writers also helps explain why I have decided to group them together for treatment in this book. Alain Badiou was born in Rabat, Morocco, in 1937, was a student at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, and began to work within a broadly Althusserian framework. He taught philosophy at the University of Paris VIII from 1969 to 1999 and then began teaching at the Ecole Normale. Greatly influenced by the May 1968 uprising, he became a leading member of the Union des communistes de France marxistes-léninistes (UCFML). He has been politically active ever since, in particular as one of the most prominent activists in *Organisation politique*, a 'post-party' grouping launched in 1985 which organizes around a small number of key issues including housing, illegal immigrants (*sans papiers*) and industrial change.

Etienne Balibar was born in Avalon, France, in 1942 and also studied at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris. He worked at the University of Algiers, Algeria in the mid-1960s and then taught at the Lycée de Savigny-sur-Orge, in France, then at the University of Paris I (Sorbonne) from 1969 to 1994. He held the Chair in Political and Moral Philosophy from 1994 to 2002 at the University of Paris X (Nanterre) and in 2000 took a Chair as Distinguished Professor in Critical Theory at the University of California, Irvine. He was a contributor, with Louis Althusser, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey and Jacques Rancière, to the original edition of *Reading Capital* (1965), writing chapters on the concepts underlying historical materialism.