

How to live and think in a time of absolute disorientation?
Alain Badiou (2021-2022)

Transcription by François Duvert

I - October 4, 2021

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Since I have the privilege of being in a high position, and far from you, I will unmask myself.

Justification

I would like to begin this seminar with a kind of justification of its existence.

After all, I had decided, in 2017, in a public way, right here, without anyone forcing me to do so, to stop this form of public thinking, this form of thinking in the open air, that I had been practicing for fifty years. To philosophize in public, without academic stakes, without program, and in front of an audience freely constituted of volunteers, I had developed this formula since the university college of Reims, in the 60s of the 20th century, when I was a young man of about thirty years. On the occasion of my 80th birthday, I reasonably decided to retire, and not to continue trying - so old - to realize the famous program of Socrates and Plato, namely to corrupt the youth.

But here is that the situation of the world, the situation of my country - France - seems to me so opaque, so little encouraging, so apt to generate in fact useless nihilisms, murderous nationalisms, habits of public denunciation, shapeless ideologies, that I say to myself that it is necessary in any case to speak, to question, to try to enlighten as far as my means allow. It would be a question of enlightening the insane drift where the rigid laws which organize contemporary societies lead us, with small or big train. It is in short to the national and world situation that you and I owe the modest sessions that we begin today, and they give the title to my undertaking of speech: How to live and think in a world delivered to a total disorientation.

I owe it to the Théâtre de la Commune that I am able to speak again after a four-year hiatus, even though in a few months I will be a respectable 85 years old. And I want to thank the director, Marie-José Malis, and all those who work here, who keep this institution alive. And all the more so since I am introducing myself as a sort of supplement, on Monday, a traditional day. Thank you to those who make it possible for me to be a kind of philosophical smuggler.

And all of you, who are here, are accomplices of this smuggling, which aims at importing intellectual materials, to think and change the general situation. And I must also thank you, all of you, without whom the notion of teaching and the word seminar have no meaning.

And finally, as you know, the years before 2017 of my *Seminar were* published by Fayard in 15 volumes. And after all, it is also this work that I continue here with the forces that remain to me. I want to thank the Fayard publishing house, symbolized by the director Sophie de Closets, and the perfect work, actually gigantic, of those who transcribed and prepared my interventions, namely: Isabelle Vodoz, Véronique Pinault, Diane Feyel.

My thanks, finally, must also go to the miserable situation of politics in the contemporary world. It is the harm done to true politics, politics considered, along with art, science and love, as a procedure of truth, it is this harm that pushes me to start my public machinery again. This contemporary lowering of the politics. It is necessary to try to build the possibility, beyond the negations, protests, critical virulence, which are indispensable but often sterile too, the possibility, or, of an affirmation concerning new laws of the social, economic and political world. What I, an honorable student of old Plato as much as of Marx, call an Idea, and more precisely an idea of what a true politics can and must be, in the light, if I dare say, of its present disappearance.

To get there, my approach will be delicately indirect at first, and will gradually reveal its true directions. I will do it in 9 steps, one per month.

I remind you of the dates. All dates are on a Monday, like this Monday, October 4th.

In 2021:

- November 8
- December 6

In 2022:

- January 17 (it touches me a lot, because I will be 85 years old on that day, in front of you if I may say so)
- February 7
- March 7
- April 11
- May 9th
- June 13

Theme

My central theme, I repeat, is and will be the implacable disorientation of humanity, in view of the disappearance of any policy aiming at its disalienation, its disalienation with regard to the laws of the market, which reduce existence to the dialectic of work and the commodity. Or who reduce it, if you like, to the triptych that gave its title to a famous essay by Marx: *Wages, prices, profits*.

I am in the line of my *Seminar* of fourteen years ago - it is a fidelity like any other - it had for title: *s'orienter dans la pensée, s'orienter dans l'existence*. It already carried a diagnosis of disorientation, notably of disorientation in politics.

My approach today will be gentle: I will start from a few banal facts, from a few axioms to which you can agree, and I will raise them today by recourse to poetry, great poetry, and I will put it at the service, as great poetry always is, at the service of the project of orienting oneself in existence as in thought.

I will start today from an absolutely banal conviction, recognized as banal: the dominant economic and social structure, today installed on a world scale, is capitalism. Everyone, or almost everyone, agrees on this. But what is surprising is rather the weakness of the consequences drawn from this evidence. This weakness can be seen clearly, in my opinion, in three formulas that are widely used, and to which the press constantly echoes.

The first of these formulas consists of repeating that capitalism is in crisis anyway, in a very serious crisis, and therefore to act as if we could only wait for its downfall. It must be recognized that an ecological variant is that: here again, in any case, since what is going to happen is the death of the planet, the question of capitalism becomes secondary. As little Greta said in her childlike wisdom, heir to the young saints who in the Middle Ages warned of the end of the world decided by God: it is better, in

these apocalyptic circumstances, not to use the word capitalism, which sounds old-fashioned and divides us.

The second formula consists in thinking that what is bad is not so much capitalism as such, but its disastrous contemporary variant, which has been called *authoritarian liberalism*. This name, in my opinion, ignores the obvious.

The planetary imposition of capitalism has claimed *liberalism* since the 18th century. The maxim of the first proponents of liberated capitalism was: "*laissez-passer, laissez-faire*". Liberalism is anything but an invention; it can be considered the most original name for capitalism itself.

And capitalism, as far as being *authoritarian*, has been so without the slightest reluctance: massacring when necessary the revolting workers, the uprising colonized, and dealing with conflicts between imperial powers by wars in which tens of millions died. The much-vaunted democracy was never, as Marx saw from the beginning, anything but the loosely camouflaged rule of what he called the *power brokers of capital*.

The invention of a puppet enemy, under the name of *authoritarian liberalism*, seems to have the sole aim of saving democracy from authoritarianism, and the laws of the market from liberalism, and to end up with a kind of false nostalgia for what I would call "*capitalism with a human face*".

The third formula is obviously a very broad agreement, which has serious historical reasons, around the conviction that communism is not desirable. Even though it was the only organized attempt to get out of the dictatorship of capital and its parliamentary servants on a historical scale, and that today in any case, nothing indicates that another way to the same goal is open. But there is almost general agreement that this hypothesis is no longer desirable.

What interests me as a starting point for this seminar is the following question: what are the ideological mediations that allow capitalism and its servants of all stripes to maintain such a favorable climate? What is being asked of us? Let's ask ourselves what we are being asked to be, for the sake of the planetary commercial order, so that we are willing to tolerate it without making too much of a fuss, in favor of a lesser evil.

I believe, and this is the most important assumption I will make before you, I believe that the key is to desire to be, or to be able to imagine that we are free individuals. Of this cult of *I am me, and I will remain me*, or of the enraged desire that my liberties be recognized, dominant capitalism has little to fear. But yes, we are in a democracy, what the hell, he will answer. You are honest citizens, honest consumers of goods. You no longer think for a second that private property is a bad thing. Marx, who writes in the *Manifesto* that his only watchword is ultimately the abolition of private property, is in fact not at all interested in the individual and his liberties as long as he can be an honorable consumer, and to which his individual liberties cannot object.

I will not dwell on this point, but it seems to me that the demonstrations against vaccination and the health pass are impregnated with this ideology, against this poor Macron who is exhausting himself doing his duty as a political puppet in a capital in the process of global concentration. We do not reproach him for his strategy of power, no, we reproach him for being tyrannical by wanting to vaccinate everyone. Since the 18th century, only a general vaccination can make a viral epidemic disappear. And that this has been studied on a large scale in the innumerable vaccinations in advanced societies, starting with our own, which has made more than 10 different vaccines mandatory. To tell the truth, what I think is that the individual, sick of his tiny liberties, doesn't care about this kind of considerations. I am *me-me-me*, and I am the one who has to decide whether or not to be pricked on the shoulder to save other people who are naturally indifferent to me, because their serious flaw is that they are not me.

This is the first point to be examined, I believe: what is the value of the individualistic obsession which, in any case, goes in the direction of rivalry and competition, which constitute the ordinary means of the concentration of capital in the hands of a very restricted and planetary oligarchy?

Moreover, note this: insofar as the free individual is at the center of everything, his relation to society is not a true relation to others, but is rather a relation of a beggar to the State and to the class that this State represents. Basically, the individual, to be an individual, to be this individual, is above all an abstract

identity - of which the State has moreover made a card: an identity card - and it can demand everything, the State, including death, in the nonsense of national wars.

Finally, a last remark: under the name of communism, a political movement, at a given moment in history, stood up against egocentrism - because the root of the word "*communism*" is in the adjective "*common*": that which is common to all, that which must be common to all. This movement also attacked the identity-based state, the man as a nationalist. But, it is necessary to recognize it, this movement oscillated between

- on the one hand, a pseudo-democratic misdivision of the State, in the form of participation in elections and what has been legitimately called "*parliamentary cretinism*", and
- on the other hand a powerless mysticism of destructive negation.

It has not known how to rally the youth to a tight dialectic between the first affirmation of a new world, liberated from the individualist dictatorship and the cult of the small liberties, and on the other hand of inevitable violences, situated in a necessary way in the service of this affirmation.

In view of all this, which ultimately revolves around the cult of the individual as the central prescription of the capitalist order, I would like to question and quote three poets who have dealt with these difficulties in ending capital.

- The first, Emily Dickinson, spoke out against the pretensions of liberal individualism. She poetically enchanted impersonality.
- Another poet, Bertold Brecht, made life and universality rise against statism, showing that the State always combines death and identity
- A third poet, Peter Paolo Pasolini, has restored, against the forgotten and dried up communism, the creative dialectic of the free affirmation and the negation necessary for the birth of a new world.

My purpose is to exalt the poetic depth of 3 poems, which sing the impersonality against individualism, the link of concrete life and the universal, the active negation in the service of the new affirmation.

Poets who thus give form to three abstract maxims of what I call the Communist Idea - Idea with a capital I! and who do it in three distinct languages: English, German, and Italian, to which I will add a suitable dose of French.

Let's start with Emily Dickinson.

Dickinson

Emily Dickinson, one day, in the middle of the 19th century. You know, in the 19th century, the monster of individualism is already big and fat, and in the hideous suburbs of London prowls, thin and voluntary, the working class enemy. This very first communist, without knowing it, takes back, from his solitude, in a poem of eight lines, an immense poem of eight lines, like so many linguistic flashes of this extraordinary poetess that was Emily Dickinson, he takes back the mythical statement of Ulysses: *I am nobody*.

Hear it in full, this beginning of a poem, in my bad English:

*I'm Nobody! Who are you?
Are you - Nobody - too?
Then there's a pair of us!
Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!*

You see, what is very remarkable is that the Ulysses-like affirmation, *I am nobody*, is only there to open a question addressed to who knows who, thus to generic humanity, *who are you*.

The surprising answer is that the person to whom this question is addressed can be considered a person, too. And the second line concentrates this discovery. *Are you - Nobody - too?* Are you nobody, too?

We have here an interrogation of great importance: if I manage to be able to say that I am nobody, if I manage to forget the narcissistic imperative, it is not to save myself, or to enjoy being anonymous, but it is immediately to question the other, in order to build, if possible, a community of the anonymous.

This means to go beyond the individual, not towards the enjoyment of a withdrawal, but towards the construction of a generic humanity founded on the contrary on the absence of the selfish individuality. This construction of a generic and egalitarian humanity is thus what is inferred, what is deduced from the affirmation *i'm nobody* that Emily Dickinson organizes poetically.

The third verse answers elliptically the question asked by the second. The person who was abruptly asked who he was answered that he was also a person, which the ^{first} anonymous person is happy about: *Then there's a pair of us!* - so we are a pair. The pair is obviously the symbol of the beginning of the whole humanity, humanity made of millions of persons. Here is well engaged an undermining of the individualistic identity fetish: by suppressing their proper name, two individuals identify themselves reciprocally as persons, thus as members of humanity, whose nominal singularity or origin henceforth matters little.

And this anonymous reciprocity is so intense that it could well be dangerous: in the world of exacerbated individualism, approaching in this way under the flag of the nameless is a risk from which we must learn. *Don't tell! they'd advertise - you know!* Don't tell, they'd advertise - you know! Let us note that the first *person* assumes that the second knows what it costs to escape from the fetishism of the self and to walk in the part of individualism under the cover of anonymity: *they will expel us*. Let's think about the fact that this desire to expel those who are considered as nobody, because they don't have, perhaps, the proper French name, let's not forget that it is one of the horrible data of our politics, even today. And that there are candidates whose only program is to say that anyone who is a person must be expelled.

Let's recap this first quatrain, in French.

*I am nobody. Who are you?
Are you a person too?
But then we are a pair, we
Not a word, you know, they would expel us*

The second quatrain all is found to denounce the individual who is such and knows himself such, the one who wants to be alone under his name, the one who is himself with his small liberties. It is like the account of what, in the shelter that they found, for their intense meeting, the two persons of the humanity say to themselves, from the lifting of the burden of being a singular individual, named, placed, they say this to themselves:

*How dreary - to be - Somebody!
How public - like a Frog -
To tell one's name - the livelong June -
To an admiring Bog!*

Let's try to translate at once:

*What monotony - to be someone!
How vulgar, like a frog,
say his name! throughout the living June
To an ecstatic bog*

The two persons, Persons, build their agreement as that of a liberation.

It is really hard to be someone: that you have to constantly say your name, that you have to carry your identity card everywhere, that you have to distinguish yourself from any other individual in order to be safe from the contemporary fetish, what horror!

Humanity thus disoriented, atomized, each atom pinned to the world by its proper name, like an insect pinned in a collector's box, what suffering!

So the poem ends: It is summer, it is the living June - will we each be a frog that croaks the false identity of the self, or, in the shadow of the saving encounters, will we be people, who amicably confront the general adventure of human lives?

Emily Dickinson's choice is made: not to be an individual frog.

Let's try to make it ours too.

And on this subjective basis of a ruthless condemnation of the effects of individualism, let us turn - with Brecht - to the state, this time, to power and its manifestations.

Brecht

I will start here from a poem written in 1927 by Brecht, entitled: *Advice to those above*.

Brecht talks about the most famous collective and state ceremonial of the last century concerning death: the celebration of the unknown soldier, all over the world, during all the years following the slaughter of 14-18. As you can see in any small provincial town cemetery, after having massacred millions in the mud and snow, with such a null result that it had to be done again twenty years later, the imperial powers invited their people to prostrate themselves before the remains of a corpse so damaged that no one could recognize it, an anonymous dead man. The point that [Brecht] addresses is the introduction of the adjective "*unknown*" into the nationalist ceremonial. He asks the question: why celebrate the unknown soldier? The unknown soldier is such only insofar as national finitude captures his poor remains. He thus becomes, *nolens volens*, an unknown perfectly classified in the categories of finitude, a homegrown unknown, an unknown whose value is strictly based on nationality alone. To the fact that it is out of passion for his nation - in truth out of obedience to the orders of the state - that he died, blown up, torn apart, buried in the mud, without it being possible to identify what remained of him.

The word "*unknown*", Brecht remarks, is insidiously contradicted by the supposedly shared knowledge of the imperial national identity. It is the unknown of this nation: the poor dead man, shredded and unnamed, is asked to embody, in front of the flag of the ceremony, that it is right to die for this national idea. Unknown designates a body all the more devoted to the national celebration, a body devoured by the power of the State, that it is not at all known and recognized, him, from his singular existence, but in what it symbolizes the national identity in the register of the death, register here accomplice of the identity passion.

Then Brecht is going to present us another unknown, the one of whom Marx had very early announced that precisely, he had no part: the proletarians have no fatherland. That he was without identity. That he embodied what Marx called the generic identity: the worker of all the cities of the world. This is how Brecht describes this unknown worker, who should be contrasted with the unknown soldier and the various death cults. An ordinary man, pulled out of the mesh of traffic, whose face has not been seen, whose secret being has not been glimpsed, whose name has not been distinctly heard. And he calls him: the worker of the unknown, the worker of the great cities that populate the continents. It is to him, to him alive, that we should finally pay tribute.

What Brecht wants is to free the unknown from any other identity than universal. It would be to internationalize it, the unknown, to tear it off from the mortifying national passions. It would be to link the unknown to the affirmation of the generic humanity, in its journey in the communism, instead of welding this word, *unknown*, to the death and to the orders of the State. It would be to make the millions of unknown living people the real substance of the future, and not the tense and emaciated symbol of the rivalries between States. Yes, the celebration of the unknown worker could be for internationalism what the Feast of the Federation was for the French Revolution: the collective, organized consciousness, on a world scale, of the fact that a new world is on the agenda, and whose political hero is in some way this nobody, whom nobody knows, and whom everybody knows is the only force available to continue the construction of the new world.

Here's how Brecht puts it:

To such a man, we should, in the interest of all of us, pay a special tribute, with a special program to the unknown worker, and a work stoppage of all humanity on the whole planet.

We see that there is not only, in the passage from the unknown soldier to the unknown worker, the transformation of a closed identity symbol into a universal figure, not only the dialectical shift from the cult of death and the past to that of life and the future. There is also the restitution of popular actions to their true destination: to the false strike, to the false minute of silence imposed by the State, is substituted the idea of a world worker solidarity, celebrating its own generic value. In truth, to the finitude of the trio death / nation / State, is substituted, by this variation on the adjective "*unknown*", a potential infinity, of which "*worker*" is the provisional name, and which is like the invention, by humanity, of its immanent truth.

Finally, Pasolini.

Pasolini

I will conclude with a fragment of the long poem - one of Pasolini's most important - entitled *Vitoria*, published in 1964.

This fragment tells something like this: everybody, singularly today, says that politics must be realistic, that all ideological illusions have proved dangerous or bloody. But what does the real mean for a policy? The real is history. The real, it is the concrete becoming of the struggles and the negation. But, asks the poet, how to understand or know the history? We can do it by knowing the laws of the history or the becoming - such is the lesson of a certain Marxism. But can we not object that the laws of history are the same for us and for our enemies? If this is the case, how can we distinguish negation from approval? We are in a situation where the destruction having been removed, the removal itself, or the opposition if you like, becomes complicity. As in a parliamentary regime, where the power and its opposition agree that we will continue as before. We then see that the supposed revolutionaries - and of course Pasolini is thinking here of the Italian Communist Party, well installed in the parliamentary regime - the supposed revolutionaries go exactly where the enemy goes. I quote Pasolini: "*Where we go, under the guidance of history, which is the history of both of them.* Under these conditions, political hope is impossible. It follows that if the young dead of the last war, the partisans in the last war, moved as they were by this hope, could see the present situation, they would refuse complicity. They would not be able to accept these leaders of the Communist Party as their political fathers. And they would become barbarians and nihilists, exactly as the unemployed youth of the suburbs have become today.

Here is an essential fragment of the poem, in José's translation.

The metaphor will be that of the relationship between the fathers, accomplices of the power, and the sons who, forsaken by this complicity with the power, are delivered to barbaric and sterile revolts.

Here is what Pasolini wrote, in José Guini's translation:

"No politics without realism", soul
 Warrior, with your delicate rage!
 Don't you recognize another soul, come on! The one
 where there is all the prose of the skilled man,
 From the revolutionary who sticks to the honest
 average man (even the complicity
 with the assassinations of the Bitter Years is grafted
 on the protective classicism, which characterizes
 the communist as it should be): don't you recognize the heart
 who makes himself the slave of his enemy, who will
 where the enemy goes, under the guidance of history
 which is the story of both of them, and which makes them, basically,
 strangely similar; don't you recognize the fears
 of a conscience which, fighting against the world
 records the rules of this struggle over the centuries,

as if under the effect of a pessimism where dark,
to dip his manhood in it, hope. Happy
of a joy that denies all ulterior motives
is this army - blind in the blind
sun - young dead people, who come
and waiting. If their father, their leader,
leaves them alone in the white mountains, in the peaceful
plains - absorbed in a mysterious debate
with the Power, chained to its dialectic
that history obliges it to reform without ceasing -
slowly, in the barbaric hearts
of the sons, the hatred gives way to the love of hatred,
burning only in them, few, the chosen ones.
Ah, Despair, who ignores the codes!
Ah, Anarchy, free love
of Holiness, with your lofty songs!

This poem, you see, is a manifesto for true negation.

His main motive is the following: if subtraction is separated from destruction, as it is in the regime of representative and parliamentary democracy (where it is agreed that nothing will be destroyed), we have as a result, especially in the youth, hatred and despair.

The symbol of these results is that the dead heroes (the maquisards of the last war) are called to merge with the despised workers of our suburbs, in a kind of terrorist or anti-national figure.

And if destruction is separated from subtraction, as it is in the nihilist claim to do without any transmission of rational thought and any truth, we have as a result also the impossibility of politics, because the young people are absorbed in a kind of collective nihilist suicide, which is without thought or destination.

In the first case, the fathers, who are responsible for the collective emancipatory orientation, abandon their sons, in the name of reality and realism.

In the second case, the sons, who are the collective force of any possible revolt, abandon their fathers, in the name of despair.

The politics of emancipation is only possible if some sons and fathers join in an effective negation of the world as it is.

A few detailed remarks to support this reading.

At the beginning, with *Realpolitik*, we have something we know well: we have a negation without destruction. I would describe it as an opposition, in the usual democratic sense. An opposition of the kind of opposition of the Democrats against Trump, or in France of the PS against the right, or more generally of the left against the right.

We find two excellent definitions of this negation:

- The first is: "*the prose of the skilled man*".
- The second is: "*protective classicism*".

In both cases, it is the conservative artistic style that serves as a comparison. For this political realism defines political action only as an art of the possible, i.e. as a practice of repetition. For the possible is what is inscribed, in reality, in what already exists: in the given historical order, the possible is precisely the repetition of this order. In the order of the artistic practices, the skill and the neoclassicism incarnate the repetition of a revoked formal order.

In this context, Pasolini, I think, has a kind of vision, splendid and melancholic. The army of young people who died in the last war, and among them - certainly - his younger brother, Guido, come to see their father, their leader. No doubt, in the background, this father, this leader is Gramsci, the father of Italian communism, scattered in the ashes of history. And then immediately, these fathers, who survived their sons, are the leaders of the revolutionary pretensions of the 50s and 60s. The army of the young

dead, *blind in the blind sun*, comes and waits *in the whiteness of the mountains, in the peaceful plains*, and then they see their father, their leader, absorbed in the very weak form of the negation, the so-called *dialectical* negation, this negation that does not escape the power, this negation that is only an opposition, that is only an obscure relation with the power itself. Pasolini will say: "*it is a mysterious debate with the power*". So the father, under the eye of all his sons, prior to his own power, is absolutely not free, and shows himself chained by the dialectic of power.

The conclusion, which one could try to formulate in a general way today, is that this father, this supposedly political father, leaves them alone, the young people. We see then to what point the problem is a problem of today. The army of dead youth was on the side of destruction, of hatred. They existed on the side of hard negation. But in the survival of their posthumous look at the fathers, to come, they wait for an orientation, a negation that can really reconcile destruction and subtraction. And they see that the present leaders abandon them. So they are left with only the destructive part of negation: they have only *the despair that ignores the codes*. Pasolini's description of the subjectivity of these young people is very expressive. Yes, it is true: they were on the side of hatred and destruction, they were angry young men. But now, and the formula is striking, *the hatred gives way to the love of hatred*: this is where the negative subjectivity, the critical subjectivity, goes astray in a kind of affect without exit. This love of hate, this love one could say of anger, a virtue very often cited by commentaries today - the justification of anger - this love of anger is basically negation as pure destruction, without any access to creative subtraction. Without a father, without a leader, there is only *the barbaric heart of the sons* left bare.

Great poetry, you know, is always an anticipation or a vision of the collective future. Pasolini describes here the terrorist subjectivity, whose effects we know. He indicates, with surprising precision, that the possibility of this subjectivity among young people is born of the absence of any rational hope of changing the world. This is why he creates a poetic equivalence between :

- despair, which is the consequence of the false negation
- anarchy, which is the destructive political version and
- the free love of holiness, which is indeed the religious context of terrorism, even today, with the figure of the martyr).

This equivalence is certainly much clearer today, in my opinion, than it was forty years ago, when Pasolini wrote *Vitoria*.

By basing his own personal abandonment on history, the poet has bequeathed, in language and its operations, an eternal truth: that of the political effects of the unbinding between sons and fathers, between despair and transmission, between destruction and subtraction.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to say that the political problems of the contemporary world cannot be solved either in the weak context of the democratic opposition, which is the equivalent at the bottom of the fathers, the alienated fathers as Pasolini describes them, because this democratic opposition, in fact, abandons millions of people to a nihilistic fate. But neither can they be resolved in the mystical context of destructive negation, which is just another form of power, the power of Death. The imperative is: no subtraction without destruction and no destruction without subtraction.

This is really the problem of violence today: violence is not, as has been repeated in the last century, the creative part of the revolutionaries of negation. The way to freedom is a subtractive way: to withdraw from the organizing pressures of the world as it is. It is also true, and this is what animates Pasolini, it is true that in order to protect the subtraction itself, to defend the new realm of emancipatory politics, it is impossible to radically exclude or anathematize all forms of violence.

The future is not politically on the side of the savage young people of the popular suburbs. We cannot abandon them to themselves.

But the future is even less on the side of the false democratic wisdom of the law of fathers. We have to learn from nihilistic subjectivity so that the transmission is also the invention of a possible foreign to the established rules of our situation.

We can say it differently. We can say that the world is not made of law and order, but of law and desire. Let us learn from Pasolini *not to be absorbed in a mysterious relationship with power*, and let us also learn never to leave alone the millions of young people who travel the world, especially from Africa, who travel the world *in the whiteness of the mountains or in the peaceful plains* and who risk being deprived of any orientation in the figure of fathers collaborating with the power

Let us be particularly careful in politics not to crush the desires of the youth with the criminal fetishism of national power.

Let us be on the side of the foreigners, as Pasolini said he was on the side of the young people who came out of the last war. Let us be on the side of those who arrive, of those whom a hard epic brings to us.

To orientate oneself in thought and in action, is to know that the young workers, coming from here and elsewhere, and notably from Africa, carry within them the desire for such an orientation. And that it must find here a new paternity. And let us simply hold on to those who want to drive them away - you know who.

Discussion

Question

[Inaudible]

Alain Badiou's answer

It is this point that Pasolini contests, in my opinion rightly so.

Neither negation can be born from affirmation, nor affirmation is really born from negation.

In reality, something must articulate negation and affirmation in an invented configuration, a new configuration, which at the same time withdraws from the established order and at the same time destroys it sufficiently for something else to be possible. And in the end, what Pasolini condemns is a double sterility. A forced sterility: as soon as the two paths separate, there is a forced sterility on both sides.

On the side of the fathers, which consists in settling down in the parliamentary democratic game, in fighting only in an electoral way, or possibly in a tempered trade unionism, or in waiting for all this to accumulate, is a sterility.

And on the other hand, the passage - the formula is striking - the passage from hatred to the love of hatred, in the figure of the young, is also something that in the end is an impasse, a self-consummation of oneself.

This is at the heart of Pasolini's poem.

It is a general contemporary problem: it is the problem of what we are almost always confronted with, notably in the Western countries, in the attempts of effective transformation of the society, of realization of the communist idea, we are confronted with a kind of anti-dialectical juxtaposition, in reality, between

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- uprisings, including among the youth, considered ultimately as a sterile negation,
- and the electoral and even ministerial actions of the leading parties, including the communist parties, which are also considered to be sterile, because this reformism is ultimately impotent.

The whole heart of the contemporary political question is: how to articulate affirmation and negation, in an encounter or articulation that does not privilege the authority of one of the two terms. Even if in the end, affirmation must prevail. But it should not, in the name of this strategic vigor, refuse, abandon or even fight what embodies at a determined historical moment the resource of the negation. This is what the poem is about.

Question (F. Nicolas)

I thought I understood, in part of what you said, that an entanglement or crossing between subtraction and destruction could constitute an affirmative path. In destruction, I mean a strong form of negation, and in subtraction, a weak form of negation. The entanglement or crossing of the two would thus constitute a double weak negation. But then I don't understand how this could lead to an affirmation - but maybe I misunderstood you. You praise a form of crossing or entanglement of subtraction and

destruction when you say "*no subtraction without destruction and no destruction without subtraction*" but I don't see how an affirmation could proceed from this entanglement of two negations, one weak and the other strong. But maybe I didn't understand you well.

Alain Badiou's answer

What is called "subtraction" by differentiation from the negation, in Pasolini, holds the affirmation. By "subtraction", it is necessary to understand what withdraws from the dominant configuration to propose another one. It is thus a dialectic in truth of the affirmation and the negation, but under the reign of the affirmation. Whereas the negation as a sort of romantic negation must be assimilated to the destruction. Subtraction indicates a process dominated by affirmation, even if it contains negation, and on the other hand, the love of hatred tips over into a negation without true affirmation.

Question

Is "*subtraction*" a resistance to what you have called the real as an intimidating reality (in *A la recherche du réel perdu*)?

Alain Badiou's answer

... in such a way that his belonging to this device is also and at the same time the criticism of its emptiness from the point of view of the interests of humanity in general. That's why he says "subtraction". "Subtraction" means that the father must act where he is, in a subtractive way, i.e. by finding the means of what we could call an immanent negation, an interior negation to what it denies. Whereas the figure of the son carries an external negation: it is the phenomenon of the appearance of a radical exteriority. I think that Pasolini must be understood, in depth, as the threat, in both cases, if there is no junction of the two, if there is no father and son, that the subtraction of the fathers - the *wise* subtraction of the fathers - will in fact lose its negative quality: by dint of pretending that one is doing this but not really etc. one ends up doing it really: it will become an interiority to the dominant system. On the other hand, the pure negation claimed by young people will remain in total exteriority, and this total exteriority makes it suicidal. Or again: hatred, an addressed feeling, will turn into an inner feeling, which is the love of hatred, and which has no real hold on the world. This is interesting : it indicates that the two elements of the dialectic must be seized in their becoming, to divide again inside their own division.

So that in reality, if we were to make a complete recapitulation of this, we would say that in the political dialectic, there end up being four terms and not just two: because each term is historically confronted with a dialectical position. And so in truth, political mastery is the mastery of these four terms, whose stakes are extremely complex and which are defined as the father and the son.

The father is divided between the fact that as a father he is the bearer of a system and a law, and at the same time he presents himself as a revolutionary father, a father who wants to transform the world, which creates a difficulty with the effective interiority. This is what "subtraction" says: what is subtraction.

On the other side, on the side of the sons, what makes that one will not pass from the hatred to the love of the hatred? of what is addressed towards outside to what is an interior enjoyment.

It's symmetrical, too: how can the father be outside when he is inside? How can the son not be inside, when he is outside? That's how it works, or how it should work!
