

## THE POLITICS OF PRESENTATION: ON BADIOU AS READER OF ROUSSEAU

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the distinction between representative and presentative conceptions of politics in the works of Alain Badiou and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Analyzing Badiou's reading of Rousseau's *Social Contract*, the paper shows that, contrary to a common view, Rousseau is not a normative theorist of legitimacy; instead, he is a political ontologist, one who thinks the being of politics rather than its norms. In this role, Rousseau defends a politics of presentation, a conception of politics as essentially creative rather than imitative. Against a view of politics as a representation of natural, divine or moral order, Rousseau's political ontology maintains that politics exists only so long as order is created, out of nothing as it were. In short, politics cannot be representational; it exists only as long as it is present, not represented. For Badiou and Rousseau, representation is not necessarily illegitimate or unjust; it is simply not political.

**KEYWORDS:** Alain Badiou; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Political Ontology; Metapolitics; Representation; Social Contract Theory

### INTRODUCTION

Reflecting on his relationship with the history of philosophy in the preface to the English edition of *Metapolitics*, Alain Badiou writes: "if one finds an emphasis in my writings – in restricting myself to the deceased – on proper names (...) it is only because justice is done to philosophy only if philosophy itself does justice to its conditions and accepts being exposed to their inventive violence."<sup>1</sup> In other words, one can treat philosophy philosophically only if one treats the conditions of philosophy, here identified as the proper names of philosophy's history, on their own terms and in the terms they occasion. Philosophy doesn't confront its history as one does an antique curiosity but as the very condition of its continued possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London and New York, Verso, 2005, p. xxxii.

Badiou's point is that philosophy invents itself, but in so doing, it also violates itself by transforming its terms – its concepts, questions and problems. However, philosophy can succeed only if it remains “exposed” to itself and to its own violence. In short, philosophy should be attuned to its origins if it hopes to continue being philosophical. If I may be allowed an elucidatory example from among philosophy's deceased, Plato's Eleatic Visitor's appraisal and transformation of Parmenidean ontology bears the mark of fidelity to origins. Although he must subject his teacher, Parmenides, to criticism in order to account for the possibility of error, of deceit and ultimately of sophistry, the Visitor from Elea insists that he should not be considered a patricide, in effect because his treatment of “father Parmenides” is inventively violent not dismissively so: his critique transforms Parmenides but only by way of Parmenides, through an attunement to Parmenides and to the thought occasioned by Parmenidean ontology.<sup>2</sup> To put a much too simple finish on it, one cannot transform that which is neither seen nor grasped. One can do differently, by accident or by fortune, but one cannot transform without an awareness of what is being transformed. Philosophy works by transforming itself, but can do so only to the extent to which it is exposed to itself. For Badiou, self-exposure is, thus, one of philosophy's goals.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the genuine philosopher, the one who does justice to philosophy, must also be a reader, and must be so precisely in virtue of and in no way apart from being a philosopher.

It is well known that Badiou was deeply influenced by Althusser.<sup>4</sup> It is, thus, not the least bit surprising that Badiou would give a distinctly philosophical status to reading. However, I doubt that this point has been fully appreciated by his commentators, disciples and critics, who, not without reason, focus mostly on the ostensibly doctrinal elements of his writings.<sup>5</sup> I say “not without reason” because if Badiou is at all engaged in transformative philosophy, his doctrines would indeed be the fruit of transformation; however, a study of the doctrines alone cannot reveal the

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<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Nicholas P. White (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 241d ff.

<sup>3</sup> For a much more detailed and nuanced discussion of philosophy, see Alain Badiou's “The (Re)turn of Philosophy Itself” and “Definition of Philosophy” included in the English editions of *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz, Albany, SUNY Press, 1999, pp. 113-144 and *Conditions*, trans. Steve Corcoran, New York, Continuum, 2008, pp. 3-25; “Definition of Philosophy” is also included in *Infinite Thought*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens, New York, Continuum, 2005, pp. 124-126.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Jason Barker, *Alain Badiou: a Critical Introduction*, London, Pluto Press, 2002, pp. 13-22 and Oliver Feltham, *Alain Badiou: Live Theory*, London and New York, Continuum, 2008, pp. 1-31.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Peter Hallward, *Badiou: a Subject to Truth*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2003, as well as the essays included in Peter Hallward, ed., *Think Again: Alain Badiou and the Future of Philosophy*, London and New York, Continuum, 2004 and Gabriel Riera, ed., *Alain Badiou: Philosophy and its Conditions*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2005.

origins of that transformation, the inventive violence of philosophy's past and present. Only a consideration of Badiou's exposure to the history of philosophy can do so. In short, treating Badiou as a philosopher requires that we not only read him but that we also read him as a reader. To study Badiou's philosophy is to study his reading as much as his doctrines.

Though I hope to make an implicit case for taking Badiou's readings of philosophy as instances of genuine philosophy rather than mere commentary, what follows is not an attempt to present Badiou's overall philosophical engagement with the history of philosophy. Rather, my concern is much narrower. I turn only to a specific instance of philosophy's inventive violence, that violence identified by the proper name "Rousseau". In contrast with a common reading of Rousseau as a normative theorist of legitimacy, Badiou's Rousseau is concerned with the ontology of politics, with its being-political or not. To this end, Rousseau defends a politics of presentation, a conception of politics as essentially creative rather than imitative. Though this basic framework of political thinking may not be altogether novel, Rousseau provides an original rejection of politics as representation.<sup>6</sup> The problem with representation is that it is essentially non-political. Representation is not necessarily illegitimate or unjust; it is simply not politics. Following Rousseau and exposing what is mostly silent (yet no less violently inventive) in his philosophy, Badiou rejects political representation as a non-political exercise of force, the empirical and historical "success" of which lies in its deceptive use of the image of politics as though it is politics itself. The success of representation is a political failure – a failure to be political. As such, Rousseau is not engaged in what Badiou calls political philosophy, which is understood as the normative disengagement from active and actual politics; rather, Rousseau is a metapolitical thinker whose work thinks the conditions of politics itself. To think about Rousseau is, thus, to think with him about the being and non-being of politics.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Charles Taylor argues on interpretive grounds that the modern theoretical project can be seen as an extended rejection of classical mimesis in favor of poesis. Politically speaking, this means that the view that good politics must model natural order is abandoned and replaced with the view of politics as essentially artificial (in the sense of an object of human production, not in the sense of being fake or phony); the body politic is thus understood as a creation that institutes political order over and against natural order. See, Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, Harvard, 1989 and *Malaise of Modernity*, Toronto, Anansi, 1991. If Taylor is right, the shift from representative to presentative political thought predates Rousseau.

## METAPOLITICS

Badiou characterizes political philosophy as “the programme which, holding politics - or, better still, the political - as an objective datum, or even invariant, of the universal experience, accords philosophy the task of thinking it.”<sup>7</sup> But what does it mean that political philosophy sets itself the task of thinking politics? What is this presumably objective datum, this invariant, called “the political”? Whatever else it may be, the political is understood and treated as an essentially normative object. It regulates the shared world of human interaction. In short, it establishes social norms. However, it does not follow from the observation that the political regulates a shared world that actually established norms are good. If the task of political philosophy is to think the political, what it thinks about and questions is the normativity of politics: political philosophy thinks normatively about normativity. At the risk of speaking obliquely, the political institutionalizes judgments about which one can make judgments; it determines what is and is not right, good or just, and because the political is “an *objective datum ... of the universal experience,*” those who study it philosophically (i.e., the political philosophers) decide whether the political determinations of what is and is not right, good or just are right, good or just *as such*. Put simply, political philosophy presumes to discover the true measure of good politics.

In contrast, Badiou conceives his own work as metapolitical. Metapolitics is “what, in philosophy, carries a trace of a political condition which is neither an object nor what requires production in thought, but only a contemporaneity that produces philosophical *effects*.”<sup>8</sup> For Badiou, politics situates philosophy. Philosophy arises in a political context, but this context is neither an object nor a pure idea that must be judged, let alone judged abstractly by so-called political philosophers. Rather, politics names the conditional occurrence of thought, including philosophical thought; it is the present context within which we think at all. The philosophy that is turned to this conditionality, which carries the trace of its politics, is named metapolitics. As such, metapolitics emerges from and directs its philosophical attention to *a* politics, an actual (not abstract) political world which is the condition of philosophizing here and now. A politics is not an object of universal and neutral analysis, but the singular circumstance out of which philosophy emerges. In other words, metapolitics is philosophy turned towards its own political situatedness. Metapolitics thinks *its* politics.

The distinction between the political and a politics also points to the philosophical priority of the ontological over the normative. On Badiou’s account, political

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<sup>7</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Badiou, *Metapolitics*, p. 55.

philosophy is a normative activity, which takes the existence, the being, of the thing called politics (i.e., the political) for granted. However, if political philosophy misidentifies politics by treating it as a universal invariant rather than a singular condition of thought and action, then it already moves away from genuine politics. That's to say that the misidentification of politics as a universal object leads to the conflation of politics with the state, which is, after all, an object – the form of which is universal – subjected to the normative judgment of political philosophy. In contrast, metapolitics thinks about the being and occurrence of politics. Rather than asking whether some political state of affairs is good or bad, metapolitics asks whether or not such a state of affairs is truly and genuinely political; its standard is truth not justice. That is not to say that justice bears no political or philosophical importance, but that politics precedes justice; justice is always and already a *political* problem. As Badiou puts it:

Justice – which captures the latent axiom of a political subject – necessarily designates not what must be, but what is. (...) [Either] we are within justice, or we are not. This also means: either the political exists, in the sense that philosophy encounters thought within it, or it does not. But if it does, and if we relate to it immanently, then we are within justice.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if Rousseau is a metapolitical thinker, we must be able to discover where and how his thought is turned, not towards *the* abstract political and its normative content, but towards political ontology, towards the being of *a* singular politics as the condition of thinking itself. Before questioning the distinction between good and bad politics, the metapolitical Rousseau must first be asking: what *is* politics?

## ROUSSEAU'S POLITICAL ONTOLOGY

If metapolitics thinks its own conditions, its own politics, and if Rousseau is a metapolitical thinker, what does he think? Badiou's answer is straightforward, yet hardly simple: "Rousseau's goal is to examine the conceptual prerequisites of politics, to think *the being of politics*."<sup>10</sup> To think genuinely about politics is to think about the conditions by which genuine politics can *be* in the first place. Badiou's Rousseau is concerned with political ontology not political norms. This is not to say that Rousseau and Badiou are unconcerned with norms, but that norms depend on the existence of politics. Rather than asking about the ideally just state and its corruption, Rousseau's primary question is: what is politics?

<sup>9</sup> Badiou, *Infinite Thought*, p. 55.

<sup>10</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham, New York, Continuum, 2005, p. 344.

Badiou's reading of Rousseau contrasts significantly with the more or less standard version of Rousseau as a moralist, as a normative thinker who considers the structure of moral and political judgment in order to provide a method by which illegitimate regimes can be criticized, resisted and corrected. According to this reading, Rousseau provides a theoretical account of politics that can serve as the normative standard of political legitimacy.

Though the evidence to support my claim that the normative Rousseau is the standard Rousseau is overwhelming, both in print and in academe generally, I will provide two clear examples which instantiate this reading of Rousseau and, due to the celebrity and influence of the sources, lend some, albeit anecdotal, support to my claim that this reading is widespread. My first case is John Rawls. Though Rawls is not recognized as a Rousseau expert (then again, neither is Badiou), he is arguably the most significant and influential political philosopher (at least in Badiou's sense) of the past forty years. As such, his reading of Rousseau may be particularly telling, especially when we consider that the passage I cite below is drawn from lectures he delivered yearly to undergraduates from the mid 60's until 1995.<sup>11</sup> To put it bluntly, Rawls' Rousseau is unquestionably and preeminently normative. This Rousseau criticizes the contemporary world and offers a morally salutary alternative; he is:

[A] critic of culture and civilization: he seeks to *diagnose what he sees as the deep-rooted evils* of contemporary society and depicts the vices and miseries it arouses in its members. He hopes to explain *why the evils come about*, and to *describe the basic framework of a political and social world in which they would not be present* (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup>

My second case – and a very different one from the first – is Allan Bloom. Once again, in Bloom we find an unquestionably normative Rousseau, who both passes judgment on the contemporary political world and occasions a normatively defensible political ideal. In a widely read introductory piece on Rousseau, Bloom writes:

Civil society enchains man and makes him a slave to law or other men whereas he was, as man, born to freedom, to the right to behave as he pleases. What is more, civil society, as it is now constituted, has *no claim on the moral adhesion of its subjects*; it is *unjust*. Rousseau's political thought points away from the present in both directions: to man's happy freedom of the past and to the establishment of a regime in the future which can appeal to the will of those under its authority.

<sup>11</sup> John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*, Samuel Freeman (ed.), Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. ix.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 192.

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*It is the task of the philosopher to make clear what man's nature truly is and, on this basis, to define the conditions of a good political order (emphasis added).<sup>13</sup>*

Mistaken or not, this version of Rousseau is not altogether surprising. After all, the *Social Contract* opens with an ostensibly normative concern: "I want to inquire whether there can be some legitimate and sure rule of administration in the civil order."<sup>14</sup> Rousseau the moralist thus seems to be concerned with the nature and possibility of political assessment, with judgment about the moral value of political states. But Rousseau's announced aim is not to discover a normative standard for politics. Rather, his opening remark asks whether legitimacy is possible, not which norms of political behavior are universally legitimate, good, right or just. The possibility of legitimacy presupposes the civil order, the political state which can be legitimate or not. Thus, to ask whether or not legitimacy is possible is to ask about the nature of legitimacy's conditions. Those conditions, as Rousseau points out straightaway, are political. Put differently, to ask whether legitimacy is possible is to ask whether politics is possible, which is also to ask what politics is.

The first chapter of the *Social Contract* opens with the famous and easily misinterpreted claim: "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."<sup>15</sup> Far from lamenting the enchainment of the contemporary world, as though the political world is so distant from human freedom as to preclude legitimacy, Rousseau asks under what conditions the shift from natural and unencumbered freedom (an ontologically primitive freedom) to social constraint can be legitimate. Rousseau continues: "he who believes himself the master of others does not escape being more of a slave than they. How did this change take place? I have no idea. What can render it *legitimate*? I believe I can answer this question" (emphasis added).<sup>16</sup> In other words, Rousseau does not try to discover the universal standard of legitimacy but the conditions under which constraint can be consistent with freedom and can thus be legitimate.

Rousseau's short answer to the question of legitimacy is simple: chains can be legitimate only if they are genuinely political. An enchainment that follows from the force of the strongest (i.e., from natural superiority) can never be legitimate or right. Indeed, Rousseau insists that there can be no right of the strongest because, although obedience to a stronger enemy may promote survival, the force of the stronger can

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<sup>13</sup> Allan Bloom, "Rousseau," in Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (eds.), *History of Political Philosophy*, third edition, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 559.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis and Cambridge, Hackett, 1987, p. 141 and *Oeuvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, volume 3, Bernard Gagnebin and Marcel Raymond (eds.), Paris, Gallimard, 1964, p. 351.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141; p. 351.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141; p. 351.

never be morally justified; the stronger cannot make a moral claim on the weaker's obedience – such obedience is neither obligatory nor legitimate: “let us then agree that force does not bring about right, and that one is obliged to obey only legitimate powers.”<sup>17</sup> Legitimate powers are not simply better than illegitimate powers; they are the only properly political and moral powers because they are the only powers which can command, which can impose obligations.

As such, “right” is not a natural concept.<sup>18</sup> The force of the stronger is an entirely natural force, analogous to the determinations of nature. For instance, gravity forces or binds me; as such, my enchainment to it can never be legitimate or right, not because it is illegitimate or wrong, but because those normative qualifications are entirely out of place and inapplicable. Put simply, I am determined by the force of nature because I cannot do otherwise; I am not obligated by it – nature cannot be legitimate or not. In contrast, political chains can be legitimate or not because they obligate; they tell us what *ought* to be not what *is* the case. Legitimate rules are ones that I should obey, but this prescription only arises because I can *not* obey them.<sup>19</sup> Simply put, politics is the condition of legitimacy. Legitimacy and its negation presuppose the erection of politics over and against natural determination; the existence of politics is the condition of possibility of legitimacy and all other normative political concepts (right, justice etc.). As such, the shift from freedom to constraint is legitimate only when it is genuinely political. Let us have Badiou elaborate this point for us:

Let's keep in mind that Rousseau does not pretend to resolve the famous problem that he poses himself: ‘Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.’ If by resolution one understands the examination of the real procedures of passage from one state (natural freedom) to another (civil obedience), Rousseau expressly indicates that he does not have such at his disposal: ‘How did this change come about? I do not know.’ Here as elsewhere his method is to set aside all the facts and to thereby establish a foundation for the operations of thought. It is a question of establishing under what conditions such a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 144; p. 355.

<sup>18</sup> The classic discussion of the shift from natural right to an artificial conception of right is Leo Strauss' *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1953. Though I (and I suspect Badiou) disagree with Strauss' rejection of the modern disavowal of a natural standard of right and just conduct, his study is among the best and most insightful examinations of this topic.

<sup>19</sup> This way of putting it leaves the question of the validity of rules to the side. Presumably, rules are legitimate only if they are also valid by some demonstrable measure. We might, thus, say that the possibility of disobedience is a necessary but not sufficient condition of legitimacy.



'change' is *legitimate*. But 'legitimacy' here designates existence; in fact, the existence of politics.<sup>20</sup>

Thus we can understand why Badiou's Rousseau, in contrast with the standard reading, does not engage in political philosophy, why Badiou's Rousseau is a metapolitical thinker rather than being a normative one. His Rousseau does not establish a measure of assessment between good and bad politics. Instead, this Rousseau provides a conceptual distinction between what is and is not politics. Rousseau's work is politico-ontological not normative. Whereas the traditional reading of Rousseau suggests that he works under the presupposition that many political states are not legitimate and that the philosopher's task is to assess the fact of illegitimacy, this Rousseau works under the presupposition that many ostensibly political states are not actually political. As Badiou puts it, "the empirical reality of States and of civil obedience does not prove in any way that there is politics."<sup>21</sup> This Rousseau does not eliminate judgment. Instead, he redirects philosophy's judgments about politics: the task of the philosopher is to understand what counts as politics and what does not, to pass judgment on the politicality of claims to political existence. After that, by implication, philosophy will leave normative judgment to those objects that are properly political. What, then, makes politics political?

### THE POLITICS OF PRESENTATION

According to both Badiou's Rousseau and the standard Rousseau, politics begins in and through the social contract. Let us not forget the basic framework and philosophical starting point of social contract theory: the state of nature, described famously by Hobbes as a non-political state governed by "continual fear and danger of violent death," where human life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short."<sup>22</sup> Because the state of nature is essentially inhospitable, humans are inclined to quit that state to form political societies for their mutual protection and well-being. According to the social contractarian view, politics is unnatural because it corrects an inadequacy in nature; it arises out of nature but is not caused by nature. However, we must recall that the state of nature is a narrative device used to discover the essence of politics, not a primitive stage of human history. In the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau puts it plainly: "for it is no light undertaking to separate what is original from what is artificial in the present nature of man, and to have a proper understanding of a state which *no longer exists*, which *perhaps never existed*, which *probably*

<sup>20</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 344.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344.

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Edwin Curley (ed.), Indianapolis, Hackett, 1994, p. 76.

*never will exist*, and yet about which it is necessary to have accurate notions” (emphasis added).<sup>23</sup> Instead of being a proto-historical reality, nature is the always present condition of political reality, the space prior to politics and against which politics arises. Accordingly, nature is both the condition of politics and the always present threat to politics.

Roughly adopting this basic framework in the *Social Contract*, Rousseau teaches that politics arises out of the non-political state of nature (however less violent that state may be in Rousseau’s than in Hobbes’ view) and by an originary event: the social contract. The social contract is the agreement by which a people comes into existence. As such, it precedes any sort of already political agreement whereby authority is conferred onto a ruler or rulers: “before examining the act whereby a people chooses a king, it would be well to examine the act whereby a people is a people. For since this act is *necessarily prior* to the other, it is the *true foundation* of society” (emphasis added).<sup>24</sup> Put simply, the social contract is the event by which politics is born, by which it comes to presence. The politicality of the social pact lies in its results not in its preconditions; as such, it is also the ground by which to determine whether or not the ostensibly political is actually political, which also means whether or not politics is actually present. Badiou is thus justified when he writes: “the social pact is the *evental form* that one must suppose if one wishes to think the truth of that aleatory being that is the body politic.”<sup>25</sup> That the body politic is aleatory is significant, since the pact is thoroughly contingent. The insecurity of nature may occasion the pact, but it does not cause it, which also means, as Badiou points out, that politics is essentially superfluous. Accordingly, the social pact is transformative; it gives birth to something that had hitherto not existed: the people, the body politic and, in short, politics:

What one must assume is the ‘superfluous’ character of the originary social pact, its absolute non-necessity, the rational chance (which is retroactively thinkable) of its occurrence. Politics is a *creation*, local and fragile, of collective humanity; it is never the treatment of a vital necessity. Necessity is always a-political, either beforehand (the state of nature), or afterwards (dissolved State). Politics, in its being, is solely commensurable to the event that institutes it.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 34 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 123.

<sup>24</sup> Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 147 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 359.

<sup>25</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 345.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 345.

The conception of politics as creative differs from a representational model of politics, one that conceives of politics as an imitation of nature.<sup>27</sup> Consider a certain Platonism, according to which the state or political order is an emanation of the cosmos, of the order of nature. The state can of course be good or bad, just or unjust, but this judgment can only follow from an understanding of natural order itself. On this view, we can judge the quality of politics only by comparing it to its original: nature. For Rousseau, in contrast, politics is not imitative because it does not represent anything. Consider Rousseau's criticism of Peter the Great: "Peter had a genius for imitation. He did not have true genius, the kind that creates and makes everything out of nothing."<sup>28</sup> True political genius lies in creation because politics is essentially creative not imitative, presentative not representative. There *is* politics only so long as non-natural political order is *present*. Far from a trite tautology, this Rousseauian point stresses that presentation is the mode of being of politics – politics only exists presentatively.

The creative and what I'm calling presentative act of politics is the social pact. Let us recall that for Rousseau, the social pact is not an agreement to hand over sovereign power to an individual or group; rather, it is the event by which separate individuals are united into a political whole, named the sovereign. What is in effect created here is what Rousseau refers to as a common self: "at once, in place of the individual person of each contracting party, this act of association produces a moral and collective body composed of as many members as there are voices in the assembly, which receives from this same act its unity, its common *self*, its life and its will."<sup>29</sup> The social pact creates one out of many. To put it in a Badiouian way, politics is the singular being of a multiple: "the pact is nothing other than *the self-belonging of the body politic to the multiple that it is*, as founding event."<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> By this I do not mean representative government. As Tracy B. Strong points out, "Rousseau is required by his theory to reject only representative sovereignty, not representative government" (Tracy B. Strong, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: the Politics of the Ordinary*, new edition, Lanham, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 96). Rousseau and Badiou are committed to rejecting the view that politics itself is a representation or imitation of something else (e.g., of nature, of the cosmos, of God etc.), not the view that government, which is after all merely an instrument of the body politic (see, Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, pp. 173-178 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, pp. 395-402), should not represent the people's will. Badiou's distaste for parliamentarianism (see in particular, Badiou, *Metapolitics*, pp. 10-25) seems to slip from the former into the latter. It is not the purpose of the present study to determine whether or not Badiou should so slip.

<sup>28</sup> Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 166 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 386.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148; p. 361.

<sup>30</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 346.

## REPRESENTATIVE POLITICS IS NOT POLITICAL

The pact also occasions the invention of another new term: the general will, a term which “names the durable truth of this self-belonging”<sup>31</sup> and which announces the presence of politics. The general will is the will of all members insofar as they are concerned with what is general, with the common good. Thus, as a party to the social contract, each person has two wills: the will of the private person and of the citizen.<sup>32</sup> The former aims at private interest. As a private person I will my own preservation, the continuation of my own privacy. In contrast, the citizen’s will aims not at the private interests of individual members of the sovereign but at the general interest of politics itself: it aims to preserve the singular multiple that is politics. Simply put, the general will is the will of the common self that was made present through the social pact. Because they aim at altogether different objects, these wills are essentially different yet entirely compossible: “just as private will cannot represent the general will, the general will, for its part, alters its nature when it has a particular object; and as general, it is unable to render a decision on either a man or a state of affairs.”<sup>33</sup>

Though essentially separate and different, the private and general wills can be conflated when one is confused with the other. Such conflation invariably undermines the general will and thus politics: when private will seeks to dominate the general will, we have the will of all, an essentially un-political usurpation of sovereignty by private faction, even when – perhaps especially when – it expresses the opinions of the majority; when a presumption to general will dominates the private by attempting to “render a decision on either a man or a state of affairs,”<sup>34</sup> we have despotism, which undoes the general will because it adopts particular objects, whereby impinging on the privacy of individual will. In both cases, the misidentification of what is properly general disintegrates the general will. But if the general will announces the presence of politics, then its disintegration amounts to the dissolution of politics. When and where the general will is not present and affective, politics cannot be. Neither the rule of the will of all nor the rule of the despot is genuinely political.

Rousseau famously insists that general will cannot be divided, alienated or, importantly for the present purpose, represented. The argument for the indivisibility and inalienability of the general will is simple enough. Just like the will of a private

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 346.

<sup>32</sup> In fact, some citizens will have a third will, as magistrates or rulers. See, Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 177 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, pp. 400-401.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 157; p. 374.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 157; p. 374.

person, the will of the common self (also called, the sovereign) cannot be severed from its source without self-destruction. Because personal individuality presupposes will, I cannot continue to be a singular and private individual without a will. If I were somehow to divide it or give it up, I would literally cease to be who and what I am. To give my will to another would be to make myself the other's tool, whereby destroying my singular personhood. Likewise, if the sovereign is a common self, a singular multiple, the sovereign cannot continue to be what it is without its singular yet general will. To give up the general will would be to destroy the sovereign's personhood, the singularity of politics. Where the general will has been alienated or divided, politics is absent because the general will has ceased to exist.

However, why can the general will not be represented? Let us consult Badiou once again before hearing from Rousseau:

Rousseau rigorously proves that general will cannot be represented, not even by the State: 'The sovereign, which is solely a collective being, can be represented only by itself: power can quite easily be transferred, but not will.' This distinction between power (transmissible) and will (unrepresentable) is very profound. It frees politics from the state. As a procedure faithful to the event-contract, politics cannot tolerate delegation or representation. It resides entirely in the 'collective being' of its citizen-militants.<sup>35</sup>

Badiou's claim is that for Rousseau politics is pure presentation – it *is* only insofar as it is present, it is present only insofar as it is presented and it is presented only insofar as the general will obtains. To represent the general will and thus politics is in effect to negate both. The image of a thing is not the thing. Thus, if politics is the eventual site of the coming to be of the people as a people, it cannot continue to be political when it is represented. In contrast, power can be transferred. The power to coerce, proscribe, prescribe and regulate conduct can be transferred to someone or something other than the people as a people, but the people's will cannot be so transferred. The presumption to delegate or represent general will amounts to the reduction of politics to power. Put differently, this presumption erases politics and leaves mere power in its place. The being of political representation is the non-being of politics.

But why is representation so devastating to politics? Of course the wax model of an apple is not a genuine apple, but it was likely not intended to be and, more importantly, its user is undoubtedly not confused about its use. We understand perfectly well that an apple and its copy can coexist and can each fulfill a separate purpose: one to nourish, the other to serve as an adornment. In this case, the being of

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<sup>35</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 347.

the imitation does not entail the non-being of the original. Why does it in the case of politics? Why cannot politics coexist side-by-side with its image, its representation?

The argument against representation is fundamentally the same as that against division or alienation, as Rousseau himself claims: “the will does not allow of being represented.”<sup>36</sup> As an individual, I can of course ask someone to represent me in some situation (perhaps an apparently political one) from which I will be absent or from which I will to be absent; this person’s decision, insofar as I have authorized it, may even bind me after the fact. In other words, I can ask or accept that another person stands-in for my will, acting on its behalf, but in doing so my will is literally absent in the place and at the time of its representation. Like the apple and its copy, the thing being represented (in this case, my will) is pointed to but is not present in the representation; my will is present elsewhere, at a distance from its representation, but it is absent from the situation in which the representation acts on its behalf.

Not only is the will absent from the moment of representation, but the will cannot be represented absolutely without annihilation. I can will the absence of my will in some specific case and in so doing transfer my power temporarily to another, but I cannot will the absence of my will in all cases and in perpetuity. An absolute representation of my will, one that acts on its behalf always and forever, amounts to the total absence – indeed, the annihilation – of my will; its total representation means that my will is no longer present anywhere, and if my will ceases to be, my personhood ceases to be as well. I have will only so long as it is present and active. As such, complete representation is in effect identical to alienation or division; it is to give up the will, which is tantamount to self-destruction.

To put this all more precisely, in authorizing the other as my stand-in, I have transferred power but not will. The transfer of power can be political but the transfer of will cannot. The general will and thus politics are altogether annihilated when they are represented absolutely: “the moment a people gives itself representatives, it is no longer free; *it no longer exists*” (emphasis added).<sup>37</sup> Representation is neither bad nor unjust. The consequence of representation is actually far worse: it effaces politics. The will does not allow itself to be represented because a represented will is absent as soon as it is represented. What then is left over by the presumption to represent general will? The image without its original, the simulacrum of politics, pure power pretending to politics. It is with these remarks in mind that we can truly make sense of Rousseau’s admonishment of modern political representation:

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<sup>36</sup> Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 198 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 429.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199; p. 431.

In a well run city everyone flies to the assemblies; under a bad government no one wants to take a step to get to them, since no one takes an interest in what happens there, for it is predictable that the general will will not predominate, and that in the end domestic concerns absorb everything. Good laws lead to making better laws; bad laws bring about worse ones. Once someone says *what do I care?* about the affairs of state, the state should be considered lost.<sup>38</sup>

Simply put, “the essence of politics, according to Rousseau, affirms presentation over and against representation.”<sup>39</sup> The extent to which the image of politics masquerades as politics is the extent to which politics has been lost, has been effaced by its simulacrum, which is accomplished in the very name of politics, in the name of the people whose creation is the event of politics as such. The danger of political representation is political effacement.

Thus if the general will names the being of politics, then its representation names the dissolution of the body politic, the death of politics. Representative politics is not politics. Politics either exists or it does not because the general will “is either itself or something else; there is nothing in between.”<sup>40</sup>

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like to conclude – boldly and perhaps immoderately – by affirming the truth of Badiou’s account of politics. I believe Badiou is correct that genuine politics is a presentation not a representation and that Rousseau taught the same. I also believe that philosophy would do well to reorient itself towards political ontology. However, the foregoing has not demonstrated quite so much. I hope that I have made the case that Badiou’s reading of Rousseau is mostly correct, but I have not made the case that their views are correct – however much I may think these views are correct. Accordingly, let me conclude by enumerating some – I hope, more tempered – results of the present study:

First, although Badiou is correctly identified as an original philosopher, among the most original and significant philosophers of the last half century, we should not forget that his own work exposes the “proper names” whose “inventive violence” has occasioned whatever is original in Badiou. That is to say that Badiou is always also a reader of philosophy.

Second, if we are to be faithful to Badiou’s philosophical contribution, we too must be exposed to Badiou’s inventive violence and to the inventive violence he

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 198; p. 429.

<sup>39</sup> Alain Badiou, *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran, London and New York, Verso, 2006, p. 95.

<sup>40</sup> Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, p. 198 and *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 429.

exposes (Rousseau names but one instance). Ongoing exposition is thus essential to philosophy.

Third, through an exposure to the inventive violence of Rousseau, Badiou returns to a thinking of politics itself, to the ontology of politics, a thinking that can bring about fidelity to the originary events of politics.

Fourth, if Badiou and Rousseau are correct that politics is essentially presentative, then the greatest danger to politics is its false image, its simulacrum: the conception of politics as a representation. If Badiou and Rousseau are correct, the greatest danger to politics surrounds us presently.

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